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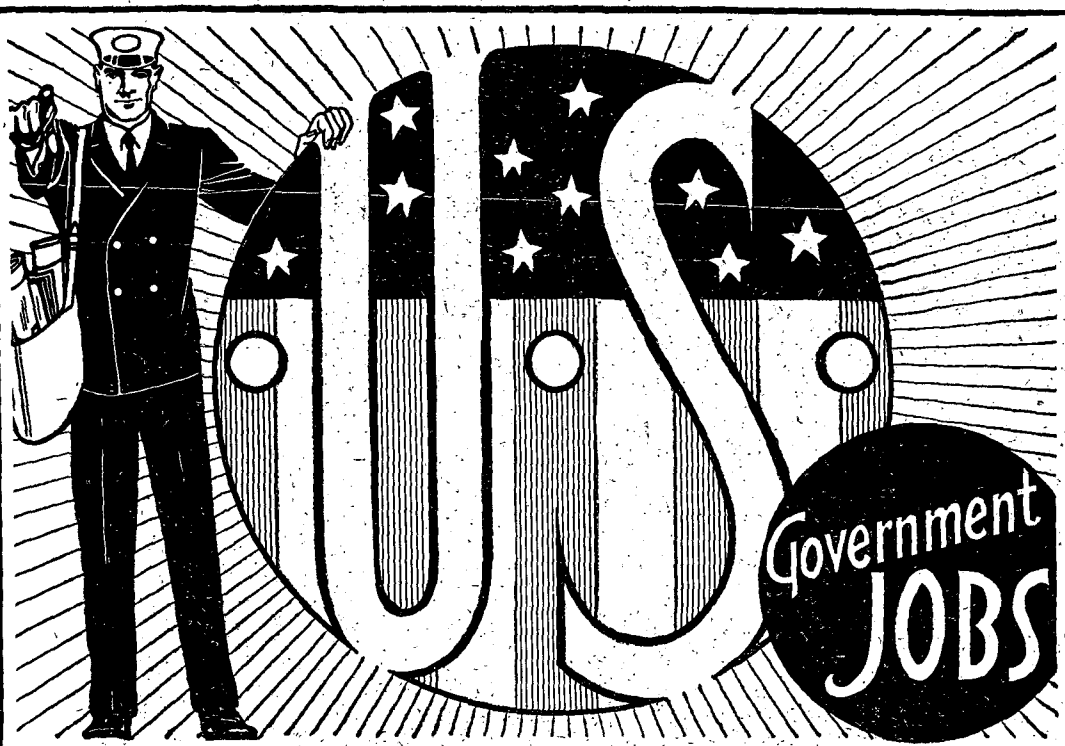

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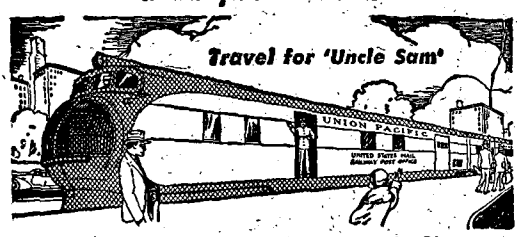

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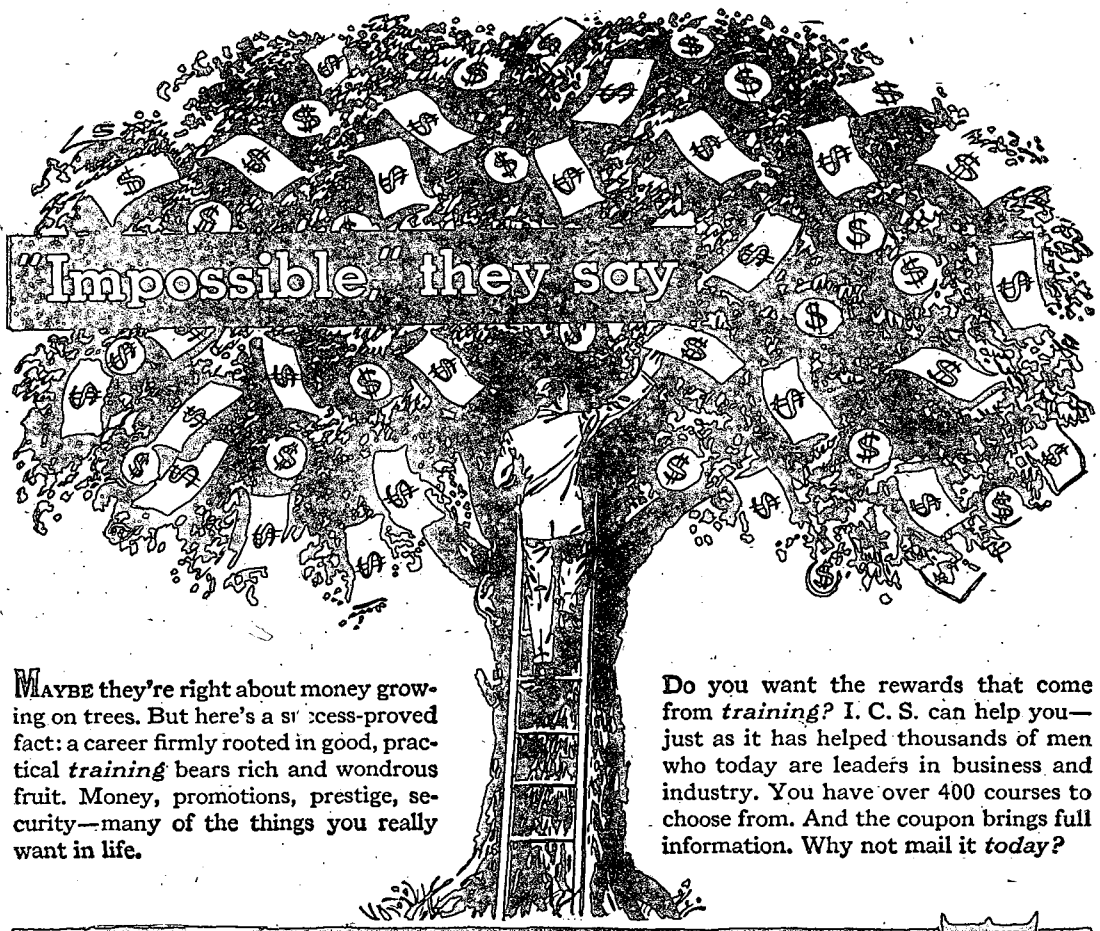

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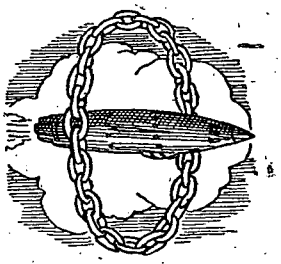
VOL. XXXVII, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION February, 1951

Featured Short Novel



OVERLORDS OF MAXUS

By JACK VANCE

Seeking a slaver, Gardius of Exar uncovers a galactic god and encounters danger, love and death during his campaign for justice! 9

Another Complete Short Novel

I, THE UN-MORTAL ..... Emmett McDowell 92

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FINAL HAVEN ..... Matt Lee 63

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JUST PUSH THE BUTTON ..... Samuel Mines 125

To a brand new home, gadgets ashine, should you invite the boss to dine?

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Michael Lance had a Utopia for sale—for those who could afford it

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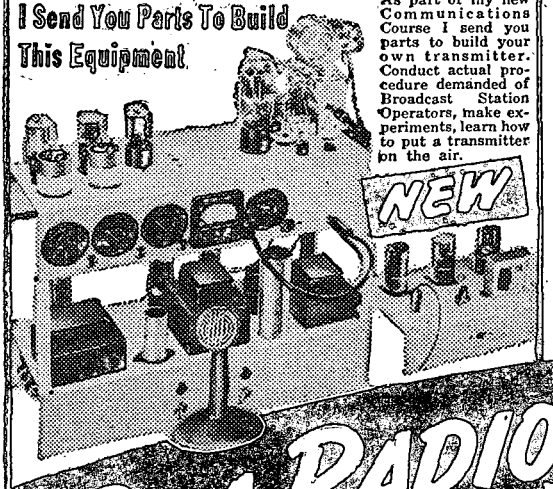

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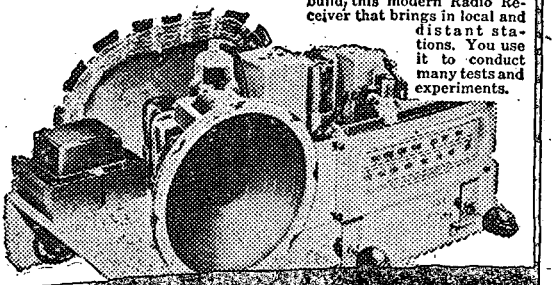

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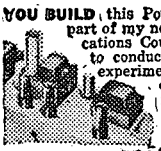

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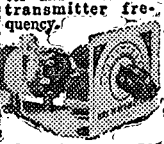

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I TRAINED THESE MEN AT HOME

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"I received my 2nd Class Radiotelegraph License and worked on ships. Now with Station WEAN as control operator."—R. Arnold, Rumford, R. I.

"Today I am considered an expert Radio – Television Technician. Have 4 employees. Radio repair business has doubled."—P. G. Miller, Toledo, Ohio.

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"Two months after starting, took a part-time job. Now working full time. Make $200 a month plus commission on servicing."—L. McNiel, Rockdale, Texas.

"While learning, made $5, $10 a week in spare time. Now have spare-time shop at home and earn up to $25 a week."—Leander Arnold, Pontiac, Michigan.

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

ACCORDING to Dr. Gerard P. Kuiper of Yerkes Observatory and Milton Humason of Mt. Palomar, something is very wrong with the planet Pluto—or at least with human assumptions anent that to-date most distant of all our sun's family. In what is termed the "first accurate" measurement of that heavenly body it has been discovered that Pluto has only one-tenth the volume of Earth.

Its diameter is but 3,550 miles as compared to our home sphere's 7,900-odd. At the same time, according to measurement of the gravitational attraction of Pluto upon its two nearest neighbors, Uranus and Neptune, it must have a mass closely equivalent to that of Earth.

Thus, if both sets of measurements are correct, Pluto is ten times as dense as Earth—and the existence of a large body of such density in our Solar System throws whole sets of other measurements utterly awry. So something is wrong somewhere and it is going to take somewhere between ten and twenty years to make necessary checkups, thanks to the slowness of Pluto's orbit around the sun (approximately 248 years).

Charles Fort's Credo

If Charles Fort had not died on May 3, 1932, some two and a half years after Pluto was first photographed by Clyde W. Tombaugh of the Lowell Observatory, we have a hunch that the announcement of this astronomical bloomer would have caused him to laugh himself to death. For astronomers and their pretensions to accurate understanding of the universe in which we live were the favorite game of this supreme iconoclast of science.

Fort's basic credo, as expressed on page thirteen of THE BOOK OF THE DAMNED, was basically as follows:

All sciences begin with attempts to define.
Nothing ever has been defined.
Because there is nothing to define.
Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species.*
He was never able to tell what he meant by a "species."
It is not possible to define.
Nothing has ever been finally found out.
Because there is nothing final to find out.
It's like looking for a needle that no one ever lost in a haystack that never was—
But that all scientific attempts really to find out something, whereas really there is nothing to find out, are attempts, themselves, really to be something.
A seeker of Truth. He will never find it. But the dimmest of possibilities—he may himself become Truth.
Or that science is more than an inquiry:
That it is a pseudo-construction, or a quasi-organization: that it is an attempt to break away and locally establish harmony, stability, equilibrium, consistency, entity—
Dimmest of possibilities—that it may succeed.

There's Much to Learn

In view of certain recent scientific achievements—with atomic fission in the fore—it may seem that Mr. Fort carried his iconoclasm a trifle over-far. Yet it can still be held as possible that atomic structure, as we know it today, may be only a local condition. Certainly our scientists still have much to learn about the basic facts of matter.

But Charles Fort *did* have a sound idea in attempting to abolish the dogma of science—he never assailed science itself despite the war-cries of his detractors. He believed that each scientific theory passed through three stages—the first when, as something radically different from and de-

(Continued on page 145)

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas?* That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

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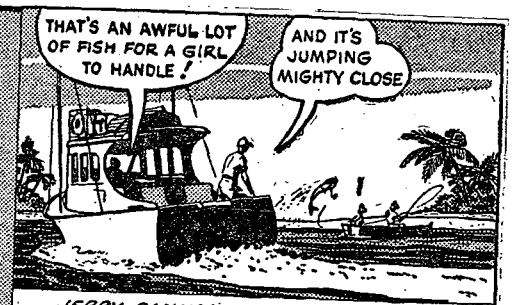
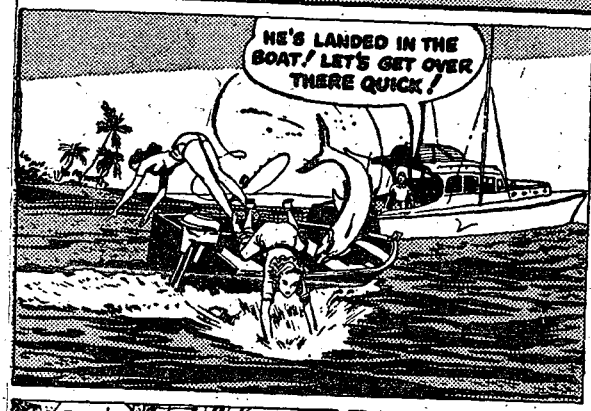
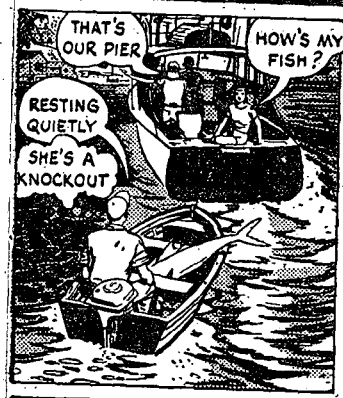
LEAPING TARPON STARTS THINGS MOVING



JERRY CANNON AND HIS BROTHER KIP ARE RETURNING TO PORT FROM A LONG DAY OF TROLLING FOR SAILFISH IN THE GULF STREAM. WHEN . . .





PICTURES? TAKE KIP HERE, BUT LEAVE ME OUT. I LOOK LIKE "BLACKBEARD THE PIRATE"
WHY NOT CLEAN UP IN THE CLUBHOUSE WHILE I GET MY CAMERA

SAY, THIS BLADE'S A HONEY! I'VE NEVER ENJOYED A QUICKER, SMOOTHER SHAVE
LOTS OF OUR MEMBERS USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN

THIN GILLETTES GIVE THE BEST-LOOKING, MOST COMFORTABLE SHAVES YOU EVER HAD WITH A LOW-PRICE BLADE. UNIFORMLY KEEN AND LONG LASTING, THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR TO A "T" AND PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
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OVERLORDS OF MAXUS

"I wish to be landed at Huamalpai on the planet Fell" (Chap. IV)

A NOVEL BY JACK VANCE

CHAPTER I

The Lord High Patroller

THE portal fort hung ten miles above Maxus—a heavy white ring a mile in diameter, beaded with observation windows. Across the thin air every detail was sharp, clear, distinct.

There was no immediate challenge to Gardius' boat. He wait-

Seeking a slaver, Gardius of Exar uncovers a galactic god and comes face to face with danger, love and death while fighting for justice!

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ed, half-crouched over the controls, glancing out to the fort, back to the speaker, out to the fort. A minute—two minutes . . .

Gardius cursed, flipped the switch on the communicator, spoke for the second time into the mesh. "Visitor's permit eleven-A-five hundred and six . . . I want to pass down. . . . Send me instructions—a signal, an acknowledgment."

A voice rattled. "The permit is being checked. Please await our orders."

Gardius sank back into the seat, then stood up and looked down at the city Alambar. Out to the horizon and beyond it spread, a figured rug of somber colors—tarnished greens and blacks, dark russets and ochers, gray of smoke and concrete and brick.

Directly below him three leaden rivers merged and puddled into a lake of quicksilver, which was surrounded, overshadowed, by the great administration buildings, the palaces and town-houses of the Overmen. Elevated roads spraddled the city like exposed veins; there was a ceaseless twinkling of motion, here, there, everywhere, a myriad trembling.

Gardius turned up his gaze, stared across the gap to the inspection fort. Pull the boat up, ram down through, crumble the city like stale bread. Line up the Lords of Maxus, rip their faces, gut their bellies . . .

"Eleven-A-five hundred and six," said the speaker, "approach Stage Six, prepare to receive an inspection team."

GARDIUS leapt for the seat, sent the boat forward. A series of flat bays edged the inner periphery of the station. Gardius settled to the stained concrete of the bay marked 6. Three men in altitude suits appeared, rapped at the outer port. Gardius admitted them—hard-faced men, black-haired, gaunt, pale, wearing black uniforms and pointed leather caps.

The corporal stepped up on the control deck—a man with a long narrow face, hollow cheeks, hooked nose. "Let's look at your permit."

Gardius gave him the paper. The corporal curled his lips as he read, "Planet of origin—Exar. Bond posted—ten thousand milrays. Intended duration of visit—one week. Motive for visit—" His eyebrows rose. "Oh, well," he said indulgently, "good luck, good luck."

Gardius said nothing.

"You'll be chasing Arman's latest load."

"Correct."

"Should have made it sooner," said the corporal. He tossed the permit to the chart table. "Everything's in order." He looked down at his two men, who were returning from the after section. "How's it look, boys?"

"Clean."

The corporal nodded. The two men snapped their head-domes back into place, left the ship.

The corporal leaned across the table. "A man on your kind of errand carries money. And he's in a hurry. I'd like to help you but there's an obstinate field keeper who's asleep and won't be waked without a growl—unless I bring something to soothe him. And naturally, if he doesn't open the field, you don't get down."

Gardius pressed his lips close together. "How much?"

A Note about this Story

NOT long ago a controversy raged in the letter columns of this magazine concerning the prevalence of sword, snickersnee and rapier in stories of a future whose scientific achievement made the current gropings of our nuclear physicists and biochemists look like the work of primary-grade schoolchildren. It was, said the complainers, an anachronism and therefore improbable.

For some reason this struck us as faulty, not to say funny, reasoning. Certainly, in a single world which finds headhunters, cannibals and voodooism existing side by side with geriatrics, vegetarians and relativity, it is neither difficult nor illogical to accept anachronism.

Moreover, if our species expands throughout the planets of the galaxy it seems to us an acceptable

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"Oh—two hundred milrays."

Gardius turned his back, pulled a couple certificates from a billfold. "Two

GARDIUS

hundred. There you are. Please hurry."

"Five minutes and you'll be down," said the corporal. "Go to the landing port just beyond the park. Who is it, your wife?"

"My mother, two sisters, a brother."

The corporal whistled between his teeth. "You must be a millionaire." He hesitated, glanced down at Gardius' pocket.

"I'm not," snapped Gardius. "And I'm in a hurry."

"Afraid your too late if it's Arman's load. Now watch that globe. When the light goes on drop throught the hole, descend vertically to an altitude of thirty thousand, then you're on your own. Don't veer off any higher, or the field will burn you crisp."

Gardius slid the boat to a grinding halt. He opened the port, leapt out into air that smelled of smoldering stone and smoke. He ran to a portal of black brick that opened on a narrow street, passed through, stiffened, leapt back to avoid a whirring vehicle. He hesitated a few seconds, looking up and down the street.

Passers-by—tall hatchet-faced people, dark and saturnine—stared at him with bright curiosity. He heard a child in a maroon jacket pipe, "Look at the Orth and he's got no mark!"

And Gardius heard a subdued hiss, "Shh!—no one's bought him yet."

Gardius went to an old man in a close-fitting jumper of black gabardine. "Where is the Slave Distribute, please? How do I get there?"

The old man eyed him a moment and Gardius thought he would not answer. But he said in a flat voice, "Take the slip-strip, follow the red-and-green band. When you pass the second tunnel you'll find a brown concrete building with a stage roof to your right."

"Thanks." Gardius turned, crossed the street, took the big step aboard the strip. Vari-colored stripes of light lay on the surface. Gardius traversed at an angle, found the red and green band, walked forward as swiftly as traffic would permit.

The red-and-green band edged to the side. Gardius followed. The strip split, the red-and-green band entered a narrow tunnel that smelled of ammonia and coal-gas. There was a period of echoing darkness, then he was out once more into daylight.

premise that such differences, such anachronisms, should widen and develop still greater variety. They are among the basic causes of human differences, of conflict—therefore among the basic elements of human stories, past, present and future.

Mr. Vance's story is full of them—nay, it is based upon them. Let those who find autocracy and slave civilizations and crusades difficult to credit in an interstellar era consider briefly the dictatorships, the labor camps and the fantastic cults that afflict our civilization today. Certainly if the latter exist, the former must be included in the future probable.

—THE EDITOR

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Tall steep-gabled residences lined the strip, complex structures fronted by columns of polished stone—carnelian, jasper, onyx. A mile; two miles—then the strip swung away from the town-houses, circled a hill of decaying shale, led up a slope lined with food-markets. The air smelled sharply of dried fish, vinegar, fruit.

Gardius lengthened his stride, broke into a trot. The strip led up to a steep-faced embankment, plunged into another tunnel. Time seemed interminable. Gardius extended the trot to a run. He collided with a tall figure in the dark and, ignoring the harsh curses, ran on.

A WAN patch of light appeared. He was out under the hazy sky of Maxus. To his right rose a huge brown block of concrete, windowless, blank-faced. As Gardius approached, an air-ship left the roof, floated off on its shimmering plane of gravinul. The port-holes were shuttered.

Gardius watched it flit off in an agony of frustration. On that very ship might be . . . He saw the street-level door before him, and approached, panting and out of breath. A guard in a black leather uniform stepped out, barred his way.

"Let's see your pass."

"I don't have a pass. I just arrived on the planet."

"No matter, you can't go in. No one is permitted without a pass signed by the Lord High Patroller."

Gardius leaned forward, hunched his shoulders, half-lowered his head. The guard leaned against the wall, laughed quietly, slapped a hand on the weapon which hung against his black-clad leg.

"The gate is locked. Tear it down with your fingernails if you care to."

Gardius said hoarsely, "Where is the Lord High Patroller?"

The guard said "His headquarters are in the Guchman Arch." He motioned to the strip. "Go back the way you came, change at Bosfor Strall to the orange and brown. If you hurry you might still be able to make an appointment." His mouth twisted in a cadaverous grin.

"Now if I were you, I'd give myself away—to a man like myself. The Lord High Patroller's got an agile mind and might think up some technical unpleasantness. I'd only sell you and to a high-class lord for kitchen duty."

Gardius' temples throbbed. He eyed the guard's face, then turned, walked back to the strip.

The Lord High Patroller sat half-reclining in a crimson-furred seat, twisting a milk-blue goblet between his fingers. He was thin as a needle with black hair pasted in a pointed lock down his forehead. His eyelids hung in a supercilious droop, his nose cut his face like a sickle, his skin was the color and texture of eggshell. He wore a robe of grass-green silk and a monster ruby dangled on a golden chain from one ear.

After a slow scrutiny of Gardius he indicated a seat. Gardius sat down.

"What is your business?" asked the Lord High Patroller courteously.

"I want a pass into the Slave Distribute. I'm in a hurry. I must return at once if I'm to be in time."

The Lord High Patroller nodded. "Of course. Relatives? Wife?"

Gardius said, "My mother, my two sisters, my brother."

"A blow, a blow indeed," said the Lord High Patroller, sipping from the goblet. "I can appreciate your desire for haste. Especially if they were in the load brought in by—let's see, his name is . . ."

"Arman."

"Arman. Correct. A new dealer, very successful." He leaned back in his seat. "I fear you are too late."

"I'm sure to be," muttered Gardius, "unless I get back."

The Lord High Patroller smiled faintly, scribbled on a card, tossed it to him. "There you are. After your visit, please stop by again, I would like to speak with you further."

Night seeped down like murky water, and the lights of Alambar glowed white and yellow. A chilling wind cut into Gardius' cheek as for the second time

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he approached the Slave Distribute.

The guard raised his black eyebrows at the sight of the pass, turned it over between his fingers.

"Hurry, man!" begged Gardius.

The guard shrugged, spoke into a cell at his back.

The door opened. Gardius was in a small room without apparent exit. He sensed an inspection—rays searching for weapons, explosives, drugs. The end of the room snapped aside. Gardius stepped out into a bright corridor, asked a woman at a desk, "Where is the buyers' chamber?"

"At the end of the corridor. The inspection chambers are to your right as you pass along."

Gardius ran down the corridor. He passed a curtain of gelid air, passed another desk into a large room. An old man in a glistening apricot surcoat surveyed him. "Pass, please."

Gardius showed it to him. "Has the load Arman brought from Exar gone yet?"

The old man shrugged, wheezed, "They come, they go. I believe we processed such a listing this morning."

GARDIUS leaned forward, his face corded. "I've got to find out!" He reached to seize the old man's shoulder, remembered his precarious standing as a permit visitor, stood back. "Where can I make sure?"

The old man, who had started to swell inside his apricot surcoat, waved his hand. "Over there is the listing bill, with descriptions. The material yet unsold is confined in the inspection chambers."

Gardius crossed the room. To his left was a line of couches upholstered with soft leather. Here a number of the Overmen sat at ease, consulting lists, drinking from heavy goblets, talking, chaffing. The arena before them was vacant at the moment.

Gardius found the postings, ran his fingers down the lists for the day. Near the bottom, heavily marked with pencils of different colors, he found what he sought:

NEW SHIPMENT FROM EXAR

Prime material, handsome and healthy, from the salubrious Principian Peninsula.

No.	*Name*	*Sex*	*Age*	*Remarks*	*Minimum Bid*
1	Vitaly Galwane	F	4	Cheerful, attentive	Ms600
2	Donal Carrius	M	4	Intelligent	400
3	Rabald Retts	M	5	Quick to learn	200
4	Glee Kerlo	F	8	Will grow to beauty	1000
5	Temmi Helva	M	9	A lovely well-shaped lad	2800
6	Jonalisma Stanisius	F	9	Obedient, sweet tempered	1000

Most of the names had heavy checks in blue crayon before them; these had been sold, Gardius assumed. He ran his finger down the list:

29	Lenni Gardius	F	14	Fresh as a flower	5000

A heavy blue check preceded her name. Breath rasped in his throat. Pale, staring-eyed, he continued.

64	Thalla Gardius	F	18	Exquisite	5000

No check—blankness. He read on.

115	Gray Gardius	M	21	Metallurgical engineer	3000

A blue check. Gardius licked his dry lips. Now far down the list:

427	Iardeth Gardius	F	58	Pleasant, charming	300

The name had been untidily scratched out—Gardius had almost missed it. After the name the word *Dead* was scribbled.

Gardius stared, head swimming. There was noise behind him, voices, a shuffle of feet, a crackle of laughter.

"Six thousand five hundred," said a voice, "and I hear sixty-six—sixty-six—sixty-six—sixty-seven. . . . My lords, my lords, a delicate bit of flesh. Speak sirs, speak! Sixty-eight—sixty-nine—sixty-nine—ah, seven thousand from Lord Erulite. Seven thousand—seven thousand—is that all, my lords? You there, my Lord Spangle? No? *Sold* to Lord Erulite for seven thousand milrays. Sold, I say."

Gardius turning around, saw his sister on the floor. Her purchaser, a tall stout man of early middle age with a

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fleshy nose, a head half-bald, a complexion of purplish-pink, was circling her, evidently pleased with his possession.

Gardius yelled, *"Thalla!"*

Lord Erulite looked up; the auctioneer turned a startled glance across the floor as Gardius ran forward.

"Jaime! Have they got you too?"

Gardius thrust himself past the glowering Erulite, put his arms around the girl. She was trembling, panting.

Gardius said, "I came as fast as I could to get you all back."

Thalla said, "Jaime, mother died this morning." She fell to sobbing on his shoulder.

Gardius turned to Lord Erulite, who stood scowling nearby. "Sir, this is my sister. Will you permit me to pay the amount of the auction and take her home?"

Lord Erulite stammered and grew red in the face. Finally he said, "She is now my property. I do not care to part with her. I acquired her legitimately. . . ."

Gardius said, "Sir, I beg you humbly not to take this poor girl away from me. I've come eighteen light years to find her and the others of my family. Surely you wouldn't thwart us so greatly."

A voice from behind said, "Stand up for your rights, Erulite. Don't let the Orth wheedle you. You've bought and paid for her."

Lord Erulite flung out his chest. "Stand aside then. It's wiser for you to be discreet."

The voice said, "He's only here on visitor's permit, on his good behavior. If he so much as violates a traffic law he can be seized and sold himself."

Thalla said in a small voice, dead and bloodless, "Jaime, it's no use."

"Lord Erulite," said Gardius, "I'll pay you ten thousand milrays for my sister."

Erulite stepped to the side, the better to examine his purchase.

"Not on your life," he said in a complacent voice. "Not for fifteen thousand. I doubt if I'd sell for twenty thousand."

Gardius said, "I'll give you fourteen thousand cash and my bond for seven thousand."

Erulite scowled in sudden fury. "Away with you and your propositions!"

Thalla pressed close to Gardius. She was cold, tense, quivering. He felt her tears on his shoulders. "I've failed you," he muttered bleakly. "I've failed you!"

Thalla stirred, breathed in a deep sobbing breath. "Don't worry, Jaime, I'll be well. You can't help me now. Be careful, Jaime."

He laughed hollowly. "Be careful of what? Myself? I don't care what happens to me."

"Oh, Jaime, don't say that. There's life ahead of you. Perhaps you can help someone else." She swallowed hard. "There's another girl—they've been saving for last. She helped me take care of mother. She gave me all her food. Jaime, if you could help her it would be as if you were helping me."

"I'll try, Thalla. Where is mother?"

Thalla closed her eyes tight, said in a monotone, "Almost before she had died they carried her out. They put her in a room they call the Abattoir. It's for dead people—and for killing people too, I guess. . . ."

Gardius' eyes were like balls of fire. "Sometime—somehow—there'll be an end to things like this."

CHAPTER II

Mardien

ERULITE took hold of Thalla's shoulder, pulled her away. "Enough, enough, this scene is most affecting. It can't go on much longer."

Thalla shuddered under his grasp, pulled away. He looked at her sharply. "None of that, young woman, you're my property now. You'll find I'm a kind master but you've got to toe the mark. Now go to the waiting room while I see the auction out."

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"Where are my clothes?" asked Gardius. "I've got to get out of here!" (Chap. X)

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Thalla turned away. Gardius stood still, then slowly followed. The hoarse voice mumbled something to Erulite. Erulite said, "Well, then, I'll take her myself." He bellowed to the auctioneer, "When do you bring forth this flower you praise so highly?"

"In a short time, my lord—twenty minutes."

Erulite said to Thalla, "Come, we go to the registrar." He walked through a portal. Thalla followed, looking wretchedly back at Gardius. He took a short step after her, stopped, then followed.

The corridor passed the inspection chambers; Thalla paused by a window. "There she is, Jaime—the girl in the corner. Try to help her. Her name is Mardien. . . ."

Gardius saw a girl in a light blue smock leaning against the wall. She was looking at her hands, touching one with the other, and her expression was rapt, almost blank. As they looked she moved her head and a lock of pale hair slipped along her cheek.

"Come," said Erulite, ten yards down the hall. "I have little leisure."

Thalla whispered, "You will help her, Jaime?"

"I will do my best, Thalla."

They turned away, followed Erulite on feet that seemed numb.

At an iron door in the wall, Thalla stopped. "Here is the room they call the Abattoir—and in there is our mother."

Gardius' hand went out as if it were impelled by force past his will. He pushed. The door swung in. Icy air gushed out around their knees. Thalla gave a deep sigh, swayed into the room like a somnambulist. Gardius followed stiffly.

The room was walled with dark brown brick, the ceiling was arched and buttressed. To the right was a square cockpit fitted with a sump. It was freshly washed down but water had not rinsed stains from the brick. At the other end was a casual stack of corpses.

Thalla sat grotesquely down on the brick, buried her head on her knees. Gardius stood unable to move. Somewhere in the stack of dead flesh lay something he had loved. Best now to leave it stay—best to turn away, turn his gaze toward the man who had brought them here—Arman.

A rough impatient voice said, "Come, come, come—at *once!*"

Snarling, Gardius sprang forward. He aimed a terrible blow at the purple-pink face. Erulite leaned back, eyebrows raised, mouth in a loose fleshy circle. Gardius' fist struck his shoulder, glanced to his cheek.

Erulite croaked in anger, "Damned Orth, now I'll kill you!" He clapped his hand to the back of his belt, hitched loose a gun. Gardius stepped close, swung a heavy fist to Erulite's side. Erulite pulled the trigger. Ion beams scorched here and there around the room. Corpses quivered, jerked.

Gardius closed in, flailed aside Erulite's arm, grappled his throat. The beam bit the floor, spat along the ceiling.

The gun fell from Lord Erulite's flexing fingers—the body squirmed, jerked—the face lost mobility, relaxed. Gardius released his grip, rose panting to his feet. "Thalla—"

Thalla was dead. A brown stripe ran diagonally down her face where the ions from Erulite's gun had struck.

GARDIUS stood stiffly, arms held away from his sides. He looked up at the ceiling, around the walls. Slowly, laboriously, like an old man, he reached down, picked up Erulite's gun, pocketed it. . . . A thud of footsteps sounded, loud voices in the hall. Gardius looked up, head thrust out in a feral pose, wild as a wolf.

The sounds passed the door, which had swung shut on Erulite's entry, died in the distance.

"Why not?" Gardius inquired, of the dank room and the corpses. "Why not? It will be a good life. Killing . . ."

He turned, picked up the body of his young sister. "Poor little Thalla." He laid it gently beside the other bodies.

Now Erulite. The embroidered jacket, flame-red, was conspicuous. Gardius ripped it off the meaty back. He felt

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hard object in a pocket, pulled it out. It was Erulite's money-case. Inside was a neat sheaf of thousand-milray notes. Gardius pocketed the money, tossed the case into a hopper labeled *waste*. Erulite's clothes followed, then Gardius dragged the corpse to the stack.

Gardius slid out into the corridor, returned to the auction room. No one noticed his entrance. All eyes were on the arena, on the girl being sold by the auctioneer.

". . . you gentlemen are cautious, I know well," said the auctioneer, "but these bids are ridiculously conservative; you will hurt this exquisite creature's feelings. Seven thousand, says my Lord Spangle. Now—ah, Lord Jonas, seven thousand five hundred. . . . Is there other money? Lord Hennex, seven thousand six hundred. Come, come, sirs, who'll say eight thousand?"

"Seven thousand seven hundred," said the hoarse voice. Gardius placed it as the property of Lord Spangle, a thin stooped man with sparse black hair, a loose jowl, an enormous beak of a nose.

Gardius came slowly up close. The girl looked at him. It was Mardien. She was indeed beautiful, thought Gardius, and it seemed a beauty that carried or shared a rich pride with the brain. She wore a set expression, neither frightened nor angry—a bystander, rather than an object on sale.

"Seven thousand eight hundred," said Lord Jonas.

"Eight thousand," said Lord Spangle.

The auctioneer relaxed, became bland. The pattern was clear. Low bids at first, the customers feigning disinterest. Small chance of the merchandise going cheaply.

"Eight thousand one hundred," piped a voice from the end of the room.

"Eight thousand two hundred," returned Lord Jonas.

"Gentlemen, my lords," begged the auctioneer, "let us proceed faster. Nine thousand, do I hear nine thousand?"

"Nine thousand," piped the voice.

"Nine thousand one hundred," said Lord Spangle.

"Who'll say nine thousand five hundred? Nine thousand five hundred? Nine thousand five hundred?"

"Ten thousand," said Gardius in a flat voice.

"Ah—good there, sir. Ten thousand, ten thousand, ten thousand—"

The girl had turned her head at Gardius' voice. He met her eyes, sensed the flavor of her personality—fruit, wine, perfume, rain. She looked away.

Spangle said in his hoarse voice, "It's the Orth. Damned outrage, letting them in here to bid!"

"Should be on the block himself," muttered Lord Jonas. "I'd buy him if it cost my last ana, the savage. I'd work him in the sulfur banks till he was yellow as Ollifans' coat."

"Ten thousand—ten thousand—ten thousand," yelped the auctioneer.

"Ten thousand five hundred," said Lord Spangle.

"Good, my Lord," cried the auctioneer. "Now there's ten thousand five hundred. And who'll pay what this blossom is worth in sheer joy? Who'll say eleven thousand?

"Eleven thousand," said Gardius.

"Eleven thousand five hundred," said Spangle. "Curse it, I should have had her for eight thousand."

"Eleven thousand six hundred," said Gardius.

Jonas nudged Spangle. "He's weakening, he's short. Eleven thousand seven hundred will take her."

"Eleven thousand seven hundred," said Spangle.

"Twelve thousand," said Gardius.

"Twelve thousand," cried the auctioneer happily. "Twelve thousand, I hear!"

"Thirteen thousand," came the piping voice from the end of the hall.

Gardius' mind raced. He had sold the family's holdings on Exar, he had slaughtered the herds, sold what jewels and artifacts he possessed—and had made up a total of forty one thousand milrays. Eleven thousand had bought the space boat, there had been a bond of ten thousand milrays, many other expenses. He estimated his cash at fifteen thousand milrays. He said, "Thirteen thousand one hundred."

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Spangle growled, "The Orth is inflating values. Such is the case when we permit them to buy back their kin. I'll say thirteen thousand two hundred if I have to pawn my crest."

"Fourteen thousand," came the high-pitched voice.

"Fourteen thousand one hundred," roared Spangle desperately.

"Fifteen thousand," said Gardius.

"Fifteen thousand—fifteen thousand—fifteen thousand!" cried the auctioneer. "Do I hear sixteen?"

Spangle sat heavily down on the seat.

"Fifteen thousand one hundred," he muttered.

Gardius found it hard to think. Forty one thousand—ten from forty one left thirty one. Eleven from thirty one left twenty. One thousand for a visitor's permit, with another five hundred bribe. Two thousand for fuel, one thousand for charts and stores, the two hundred milray squeeze from the corporal in the fort—fourteen thousand milrays he still owned.

Failure again—he turned his head away from the questioning glance of the auctioneer. An outlander bidding past his means was guilty of a misdemeanor, might be seized and sold. And the bidding was already too high for him.

He could sell his space-boat—but that would hardly help him now. He noticed the glances stealing in his direction. Triumph, malice, distaste— Feeling for his money-case, his hand came in contact with an unfamiliar bulk. It was Erulite's money.

"Fifteen thousand five hundred," he said.

THERE was silence. Then the auctioneer said, "Fifteen thousand five hundred has been bid . . ."

Spangle cursed, softly, thickly.

"Fifteen thousand five hundred—who'll say sixteen thousand? You sir? *You,* Lord Jonas? Lord Hennex? Lord Spangle? Sixteen thousand? No? . . . Sold then, sold, she's yours, sir, this precious yellow-haired jewel."

Gardius spoke no word to the girl. He paid the money to Ollifans, the old man in the apricot surcoat, received a pink certificate of ownership.

Ollifans thumbed through a file. "Her penal frequency is twenty-six and seven hundred thirty-three thousandths megacycles. I'll write it on the certificate."

"Penal frequency? What's that?"

Ollifans chuckled. "I forgot. You're an Orth and unsophisticated. A circuit is blasted into the skin of her pretty back—a web of conductive dust that resonates at frequency.

"If she's lost and you would find her, send out a signal at the right frequency, and she'll bounce back her whereabouts to you. And if she's insolent and lazy and yet won't stand still for a beating, tune up the signal strength and the mesh will heat and then she'll know where authority lies."

Ollifans shoved his fingers through loops on his apricot-golden jacket, leaned back, nodded pompously. Gardius opened his mouth to speak—closed it, said finally, "Tell me, who bought these two persons?" He indicated numbers twenty-nine and one hundred fifteen on the bill—his brother and sister.

Ollifans wrinkled his brow, pursed his mouth. "That is forbidden information."

"How much?" Gardius asked, grinning like a mask of carved wood.

Ollifans hesitated. Gardius laid five hundred-milray notes on the desk.

"A thousand," said Ollifans.

Gardius laid down a thousand.

"What's going on here? demanded a hoarse voice. Lord Spangle appeared, his eyes darting from the money to Gardius and Ollifans. "Do I detect the bribing of a Distribute servant? If so—"

"No, no, my Lord," protested Ollifans, drawing the money to the pouch at his belt. "A gratuity, my Lord, only a gratuity. As you are aware, I am incorruptible."

Lord Spangle turned to Gardius. "Be off with you then, you money-dripping Orth, be off with your woman."

Gardius slowly turned toward the door.

"Now, Jonas," said Spangle in a

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grumbling tone, "if that lax fellow Erulite would return as he promised we'd be away."

As they passed out the door Mardien said hesitantly, "He called you an Orth. Are you an outlander then?"

Gardius said, "Do I resemble one of these Overmen?"

"No—very little."

"I came from the Great Farees Island on Exar," said Gardius. "To buy my mother, my two sisters and my brother. I failed. My mother and one sister are dead. My brother and my younger sister are sold—as good as dead. The sister that is dead, Thalla—"

Mardien shot him a puzzled glance. "Thalla—*dead?*"

"Yes," said Gardius. "Dead. She asked me to buy you and take you home. I will do so to the best of my ability."

She turned away. "Oh!"

Gardius looked at her sharply. The overtone in her voice was not exultation.

Was it sadness at Thalla's death—disappointment?

She said slowly, "I thought you bought me because—you needed a slave."

"No," said Gardius. "I need no slaves. As soon as we leave the planet—and we're leaving tonight"— He glanced behind them. There was no excitement. Erulite's body still lay in the Abattoir—"I'll tear up this pink certificate. Until then—I might need to show proof of possession."

They came to the woman at the desk. She glanced at the pink slip, punched a button. The partition snapped aside. They passed out into the cold damp night of Maxus. Gardius breathed deeply. Out here he could at least run.

Three of the five moons rode high in the sky and the stern buildings of Alambar were hoary and frosted in the white light.

Mardien shivered. The light blue smock was hardly warm. Gardius unclipped his cape, threw it around her shoulders.

Mardien said in a withdrawn tone, "I don't want to leave Maxus."

"*What!*"

"I have a mission here."

Gardius became filled with a sudden heady anger.

"What mission is this?"

She said in the same abstract voice, "A private matter."

Gardius turned away. "Private or not, you're coming away."

She gave him a long cool glance that seemed to hold something of mockery, as if to say "You failed to bring help to your own family—so willy-nilly I must be dragged home to soothe your ego."

Gardius said sharply, "Where is your home?"

"It's not on Exar."

"Where then?"

The constrained manner slipped away for an instant. Her expression revealed an inner world of fire and feeling, gorgeous color temporarily masked.

"I won't tell you."

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER III

Who Is Arman?

THIS was a fine to-do, thought Gardius. Ingratitude, perversity—how did the quotation go?—woman is thy world-shape. Devil take her then! He'd drop her at the first civilized planet and call his duty done.

Then—there was the course of his life before him. How easy and broad it seemed! No ambiguities, no vacillations—the future was fixed. First—and Gardius smiled a wide smile that showed his teeth—first Arman. *Arman!*

He knitted his brow. Who was Arman? Mardien might know. As the slip-strip bore them through the tunnel, now dim-lit by a length of blue tubing, he asked, "You must have seen Arman."

She stiffened. "Yes."

"What is he like?"

Her voice was guarded. "He is a magnificent man. As young as you, taller, a head—oh, marvellous! Like Penthe's dream. His voice is swift, direct—like a trumpet. He stands on the deck of his ship like a space-god."

Gardius' mouth twisted askew. "You sound as if you admired him."

She was silent a moment. Then, "You don't know him?"

"I intend to know him," said Gardius. "Very well indeed. And he will know me well. Mine will be the last face he looks on."

She withdrew into herself. Gardius hardly noticed her disdainful toss of head. How to find Arman? How to look through the north end of the galaxy with its half billion stars and say, "Here can be found he whom I seek?"

On man on Maxus would know Arman's whereabouts—the Lord High Patroller. And the Lord High Patroller had suggested a second interview.

Gardius' mind churned. They swept out of the tunnel, down the slope lined with the food markets, now shuttered for the night. A great black cat scuttled ahead of them down the strip. Through trees to their left came the metallic glint of the three moons on one of Alambar's rivers.

Gardius tried to arrange the elements of the situation in a pattern. First Erulite's body would soon be discovered. Then—a hue and cry for Gardius. And if he were caught they would not waste him at an execution. He would be assigned to a gang in the lead mines under the Sraban Ice-cap. He would never see the sky again. Therefore—leave Maxus while there was still time.

Still—Arman must be located. The Lord High Patroller might know—but would he lay himself bare? A successful slaver was an asset to be cherished by the Overmen of Maxus.

Then there was Mardien. He glanced at her sidelong, saw the glint of her eyes flashing away. She had been watching him. He felt the tingle of her nearness—disturbing, distracting. Her beauty was more than conformation of bone and flesh. It was a witchery of the mind. She was a nymph-thing, a creature of silk and dreams and the pale night-lotus of the Warm Forest.

Could he take her on his ship without great stress to his mind? And if he forgot his mission, forgot his promise to Thalla and thought to take her sweetness and should she resist—might he not win violently that which was not given? And then—where would be his integrity, the clear soul which would let him kill Arman without pang or self-questioning?

And if he took her, he would thereby lose the best part of her—though he did not phrase it so to himself. Damned woman! What did she want on Maxus? Arman had brought her. She had been selected for a purpose. Obviously her beauty had played a part in the selection. Beautiful women made good spies.

But—what value had spies on Maxus when a slave, after passing through the Distribute, was lost to the rest of the Universe? It was an adage of the time that sending a spy to Maxus was like feeding milk to a fish. Damned woman! Gardius hunched forward.

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But he straightened again. There were his other problems. He could probably allow himself the night before the alarm over Erulite's death would go out. Indeed, if slaves had the disposal of the bodies Erulite's presence among the corpses might go unreported.

Everything considered, it seemed wise to visit the Lord High Patroller once more. But Mardien—what to do with her? It was uncomfortable having her on his hands. Yet—with her professed desire to stay on Maxus—it would not do to let her out of his sight. She would find it easy to evade him. He decided suddenly but definitely that he did not care to see this occur.

"Come," he said brusquely. "This is the Bosfor Strall. We change here. We're going to visit the Lord High Patroller."

HIS Excellency, the Lord High Patroller, wore a glossy sheath of cinnamon-colored gabardine, with a rather foppish collar of watered green silk. He was standing at the far end of a library carpeted in bright green, the walls being panels of white marble between squat black brick piers. In his hand he held a large limp libram of pale brown leather. This he laid down as Gardius entered, Mardien a pace behind him.

Gardius motioned his erstwhile slave to a chair. "Sit there."

The Lord High Patroller waved an elegant hand. "Well, Sir Gardius, what luck in your quest?"

"Very little," said Gardius.

The Lord High Patroller seated himself on a metal bench, motioned Gardius to do likewise. "No doubt you feel a measure of resentment against us folk of Maxus?" he suggested, his black eyes watching Gardius intently.

Gardius said, "I cannot deny it."

The Lord High Patroller laughed ruefully. "It is the measure of the misunderstanding from which we suffer. Do you know, Sir Gardius, how many Overmen live on Maxus?"

Gardius shrugged. "I have never heard a reliable figure."

"There are something over forty million of us. Think of that, Gardius! A mere forty million! We design and manufacture for the galaxy. Our industries produce the complicated mechanisms by which you of the outer planets subdue your environments. Forty million men who own and manage the greatest industrial complex of all time!"

Gardius, not wishing to become embroiled in sociological argument, said nothing.

"These forty million Overmen supply the brains," the Lord High Patroller continued. "We organize, superintend. See then—our genius is exploited by the galaxy to its benefit. We trade everywhere. Your garments are spun on Maxus looms. Your space-boat was built at the Pardis Junction Space-shop.

"But"—the Lord High Patroller leaned forward—"the forty million brains are needed at the top. We cannot waste our strength. So—we use whatever labor we find expedient and—I repeat—the whole galaxy benefits."

Gardius said evenly, "You present an aspect of life on Maxus I had not considered."

The Lord High Patroller rose, paced up and down the bright green carpet, the tight sheath of the bronze gabardine emphasizing his thinness. Pencil-thin, eel-thin, though Gardius—a ridiculous fop with his careful lock of black hair, his ruffled collar. And yet—as he met the Lord High Patroller's brilliant eyes—a man with a brain of extreme quickness and intelligence.

"Now," said the Lord High Patroller, "the forty million Overmen manage a labor force of—I say—a large number of workers. And here is the seed of a precarious situation." He laughed at the expression on Gardius' face. "You are thinking of revolt, insurrection? Bloody-handed slaves singing in the streets? Nonsense, the possibility does not exist.

"We have a central control system which positively, theoretically and finally makes such an occurrence impossible." He licked his lips, cocked his eyebrows quizzically at Gardius. "I speak of our industrial techniques. They are our fundamental treasure. For instance,

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give me a few ounces of iron, a sheet of mica, a trifle of polonium for a catalyst, and I will build a cell which, when exposed to the air, will generate several thousand amperes steadily for years on end.

"Look." He put a finger under a corner of the table. "Foamed silicon. As light as air, as strong as tough wood. Our brick—the black bricks we use to build our houses. Strong, cheap, an excellent insulator—they are the slag from our mine retorts, molded thousands at a time in instantly re-usable molds.

"The gravinul units which we sell by the million, the automatic air-conditioner which cools a room by expelling neutrinos through the walls, warms it by absorbing neutrinos from the all-present clouds, converting the energy to heat. These secrets are our life.

"We grow no food, our seas are poison, our soil is wet ash. So you see—once a worker has been committed to a factory, once he learns the techniques of the Maxus industries, we can never permit him to leave."

He resumed his seat, looked at Gardius expectantly, as if waiting for applause. Gardius said, "Your caution is understandable."

The Lord High Patroller made an offhand gesture. "Of course, if a person like yourself arrives on Maxus and is able to recover a friend or relative before he is assigned, then we are glad to oblige. In the first place"—he laughed openly—"the outlander will pay top prices at the Distribute. More, usually, than the person he seeks is worth as a worker. And then—we are not without humanity."

"I am glad to hear that," said Gardius dryly. "My brother and my younger sister were sold before my arrival. The clerk refused my bribe—or rather, he took the bribe, but refused me any information—when he found one of your Lords watching him."

"Too bad," said the Lord High Patroller. He nodded toward Mardien. "This, I presume, is your other sister."

Gardius remained silent.

"And your mother?"

"Dead."

The Lord High Patroller fluttered his fingers. "My regrets."

Gardius said abruptly, "Will you locate my brother and sister for me? I will gladly pay—"

THE Lord High Patroller shook his head. "I am sorry; it is impossible. An awkward precedent would be set. The Patriarch, for all the remarkable scope of his vision"—he winked with pursed mouth at Gardius, a sly, sarcastic wink—"is adamant in this respect. He would demand an accounting and I would be at a loss."

"Why, then," demanded Gardius, "did you wish to see me again?"

"It was in connection with this fellow Arman," said the Lord High Patroller, buffing his fingernails on his sleeve. "My spies tell me strange things about him."

"Indeed?" Gardius leaned forward.

"He's no ordinary slaver.

"I gather that."

"He was the son of a Maxus Lord and a slave from the planet Fell. Usually such children become workers but the father, in this case, took a fancy to the child, gave him a semi-technical education, sponsored his status as a member off the military caste." The Lord High Patroller shook his head.

"Arman turned out badly. He became an acrobat, a gymnast jaekanapes. Tiring of this livelihood he established a religious cult among elderly women. He succeeded brilliantly—until at last he was suspected of strangling some of his benefactors for their jewels."

There was a small sound from Mardien. The Lord High Patroller glanced at her curiously, then continued. "So you see he has varied interests. First, a wastrel, then an acrobat in purple tights, and all the time a murderer of old women.

"Maxus became too hot for him. It was necessary for him to escape or be sentenced to slavery. He accomplished the impossible—he escaped. What do you think of that?"

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"I'm interested."

"He used the Patriarch's private yacht." The Lord High Patroller smiled faintly as at a joke. "The Patriarch's Chief Consort ordered it up for him. It was a beautiful yacht—bathrooms carved from solid tubong ivory, carpets of angelesine floss, chambers upholstered in violet silk crumple.

"The Patriarch naturally was—and is—aroused. He will be more so when he finds that Arman, under the unassailable immunity of a visitor's permit, has sold us a large cargo of slaves. He will be curious as to why I have not arranged that Arman be suitably punished for his crimes. The Patriarch has a memory for insult like the mythical land-leviathan."

Gardius smiled bitterly. "Why don't you send out one of your firebrand lords to kill him? Lord Spangle, for instance, who seems to be the soul of valor."

The Lord High Patroller shook his head. "The Overmen never leave Maxus except in a warship. A single man might be captured, tortured free of all our secrets. At the very least he would be killed, since outside peoples make no amicable pretenses with us. All our outland agents are Orths—excuse me, I should say, outlanders."

"So?"

"So," said the Lord High Patroller, "the news of Arman's death would be a great comfort to me and to the Patriarch. Arman delivered alive would be a cause for rejoicing. I select you for these confidences, you understand, because you presumably have inclinations of your own for Arman's discomfort."

Gardius stirred. "What do you offer?"

"You spoke of a brother and a sister?"

Gardius looked irresolutely at the floor. To kill Arman—his dearest wish. To become a paid assassin, a cutthroat. And yet, Lenni and Gray. A quick flush of shame crossed his cheek. Had he hesitated even an instant? "Yes. A brother and a sister."

"When Arman's death by your hand is verified they will be at your disposal."

"Unharmed? My sister . . ."

"Unharmed. Your sister will be placed in the service of an old lady."

"I accept your terms."

"Now," said the Lord High Patroller, "as to money. Do you require further funds, or was Lord Erulite's wallet ample for your needs?"

GARDIUS squinted. He tensed, stared, speechless.

"A lazy, ne'er-do-well, the Erulite," observed the Lord High Patroller. "But, my dear friend, you have not responded to my offer."

"I can always use money," said Gardius, stifling his distaste.

"Excellent. Your answer reassures me. Here." The Lord High Patroller tossed him a packet. "Thirty thousand milrays. Your boat has been serviced, refueled. You will leave at once."

"For where?"

The Lord High Patroller poured a trickle of liquid into a goblet, offered it to Gardius, who declined, tasted it himself, puckered his lips, made a sucking, smacking noise with his tongue.

"Ah—I cannot say definitely. But we have a technique for discovering these things when our agents prove inept. I'll confide it to you. We carefully list the purchases made by members of the ship's crew. For instance, we know that Arman's steward has stocked the food locker with fresh fruit for two weeks. Highly significant—too scant, you see, for an extended voyage.

"Arman, however, loaded his fuel bunkers to the last possible converamp. Again, the steward put aboard a large supply—several months stock—of glyd. Which, as you may be aware, is a fermented pulp consumed almost exclusively by races of Hyarnimmic extraction, such as we Overmen, the Clas of Jena, the Luchistains."

He eased himself into a chair, stroked his face. "All very significant. Again, the medic stocked his locker with parabamin sixty-seven for use in oxygen-rich atmospheres and several million units of anti-pink-lip serum as well as the usual virus-banes, de-allergizers and cell-toners.

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"And then Arman's cargo—very suggestive. No small rotomatics but cases of micrometers, light-samplers and our new all-purpose power-meter. No flashlights, guns, sewing-machines, gravinul units—but tri-dimensional duplicators and ingots of our super-conductive crystallized lead." He eyed Gardius with polite curiosity. "Now what would you make of all this?"

Gardius said, "I imagine that first you laid out a sphere at a two-week radius from Maxus and listed the inhabited planets on that sphere."

"Correct. There were forty-six."

"An oxygen-rich atmosphere implies a world heavily vegetated. Pink-lip suggests humidity. A planet with extensive swamps and jungles."

"Continue."

"A planet with fresh fruit but no glyd. Therefore a planet inhabited not by Hyarnimmics but by Savars, Gallicretins, Congoins or Pardus. A people without extensive research centers——with small factories producing for local consumption, rather than designing or originating."

The Lord High Patroller made an airy motion. "Only one world of the forty-six fills all these conditions. And that is Fell—the third planet of Ramus."

"Fell," said Gardius thoughtfully.

The Lord High Patroller said, "On Fell lives a curious people, set apart from the rest of the population by local superstition—the Otros. Arman's mother was an Otro. They are said to be unanimously insane."

CHAPTER IV

Sometimes a Few Must Suffer

THE slip-strip eased them through the darkness. It was long after midnight. The streets were bare. A chilly wind, smelling of industrial waste and drainage, bit at their backs. Buildings hulked up dull and lifeless on either side. They showed no lights to the street and rime glistened on the black brick where the infrequent street lights shone. It was hard to imagine humanity within those heavy complex masses.

They were alone on the slip-strip. The streets were bare as far as they could see ahead. The dingy alleys opening at intervals were as untenanted, damp, dead. A fine rain began to fall and the wind whipped ghostly veils at the street-lights.

Finally the portico to the central field loomed out of the rain. Two cressets, memorializing an event of the past, flared wildly on each side of the arch, hissing in the drip of the rain. They left the strip, passed through the arch out on the field. The rain stopped suddenly. The three moons broke through the ragged silver clouds but the light spent itself on the intricate roof silhouettes and they could not see the fused earth which crunched and crackled under their feet.

Gardius at last found his boat among the dozen other craft on the field. He reached up, pulled down the ladder. Mardien climbed into the boat. Gardius followed, switched on the lights. He looked around the cabin, where he had spent so many frantic days and nights, and sighed, suddenly overcome with gloom and frustration.

Wasted energy, wasted time, wasted emotions, how could he—how could any man—hope to overcome the power and mass of Maxus? He sighed a second time, went to the controls, turned power into the generator. The core of heavy metal jumped into the center and began its whirl.

The generator whined, rose in pitch, gradually died out of hearing. Gardius arranged the controls for take-off, sat back to wait the signal light, which would flash when the rotor spun at sufficient speed to smash impinging mesons into a steady jet of energy.

He turned his head. Mardien was standing in the middle of the cabin, as strange and out of place to his eyes as a flowering tree. Her face was drawn and forlorn. Her pale yellow hair was damp and hung in clammy strings. Gar-

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dius said in a voice as friendly as he could manage, "I'll take you to any port you like in the quadrant I'm heading for."

She made no direct reply but, looking up and down the cabin, asked, "Where are my quarters?"

Gardius laughed wearily. "Quarters? You're lucky to have a locker for your clothes. I'll run a curtain across that corner and there will be your quarters."

He watched as she carried her small belongings across the cabin. With an effort he wrenched his eyes from the supple back, the slender legs. A sadness —sweet but remote and impersonal— came over him. Such things were not for him. His life was dedicated. He could not permit himself distracting thoughts. No soft things, no yellow-haired girls, no possession he could not immediately jettison. He must be free, flexible.

Mardien said in a soft voice, "Why do you look at me like that?"

Gardius blinked, "Like what?"

"Have I done something wrong?"

"Nothing I know of," was the careful reply. "In any event your life is your own."

"You bought me. I am your property by the laws of Maxus."

The signal light flashed green. Gardius slammed the port, screwed down the sealing-ring. He reached in his pocket, handed her a pink slip of paper. "In ten minutes we will be past the Portal Fort, out into clear space. Then you'll hear the only command I will ever give you."

He slid into the pilot's seat, moved the controls. The boat rose from the ground, up into the light of the three moons. Alambar fell below, became a panorama in a thousand tones of black and gray.

The inspection at the satellite was brief. Then they were out in space. "What is the command, Gardius?" Mardien asked.

"Tear up the pink slip."

She obeyed him. "Thank you, Gardius."

"I want no thanks," said Gardius, looking away. "Thank the memory of my sister. Thank your own goodness which made her love you. Have you decided where you wish to be landed?"

"Yes," said Mardien. "At Huamalpai on the planet Fell."

A PAIR of human beings in a glass-and-metal hull, fleeting through space like dreams through a sleeping mind. Two personalities thrust, one against the other, forced into intimacy, the intimacy of friendship or the evil intimacy of hatred.

First the physical intimacy. One moves—the other is aware of the motion. A breath, a sigh, is a sound in the silence. When one takes a step he is influenced in the direction of his step by the space the other occupies.

Then the solitude, which the surface-dweller cannot conceive. He stands on the ground, looks up into the bowl of the night sky. Suppose this bowl were also below him, on all sides, and he were alone in black vacancy, with stars out at infinity?

Enclose him in a hull—this is life in a space-boat. A companion would be bound to him psychically, as important and multiplex as himself. Even more absorbing since the companion would be the only variant in the ordered area at hand.

Finally the inactivity, the lack of occupation. In ordinary circumstances a man so situated beside a slender yellow-haired girl would founder in carnality. It would be incomprehensible, un-human, otherwise.

But the circumstances were unique. Gardius had dedicated his life and the rapt concentration he lived in seemed to deaden his more overt virility. He recognized the possibilities at hand. Occasionally his eyes rested on the curve of the girl's hip or the line of her thigh but there was no compulsion.

Mardien, who had accepted physical contact as an inevitable corollary to slavery, found his disinterest puzzling. Since she was possessed of normal vanity it was subtly troubling. Did he find her unpleasant? Was Gardius an unnatural man? Eyeing his broad back,

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the short dark thatch of rough hair, the clamped mouth and compressed controlled gestures, she knew this theory to be incorrect.

Perhaps he was bound to another woman.

"Gardius?"

He turned his head. His eyes had been blank as marbles. "Yes?"

"You have no more family on Exar?"

"No."

She settled beside him. "What was your business before you left Exar?"

"Architecture—industrial design." He eyed her with a glint of curiosity. "And you?"

"Oh—I instructed small children in social responses."

"And where is your home?"

She hesitated, then said, "It is on Fell—on the Alam Highlands above Huamalpai. You are taking me home."

Gardius stared at her an instant, glanced across the room to the *Directory of Inhabited Worlds*, then back to Mardien.

"But that is where the Otros live—the crazy Otros. Are you an Otro?"

"Yes."

Gardius studied her a moment. "You're not perceptibly abnormal. Is it true what the Directory says about the Otros?"

"I don't know. What does it say?"

"Besides describing the Otros as a race of lunatics—well, read it for yourself." He rose, found the place in the book, handed it to her. She read passively and he watched—frowning, wondering. She put the book down.

"Well? Is it true?"

She shrugged. "Do I appear supernatural or super-human?"

He smiled briefly. "No. *Are* you?"

Mardien shook her head. "Of course not. We're normal human beings. Our children are no different from Exar children. But we have been trained in a way which gives us advantages."

"What kind of advantages?"

She hesitated. "It is not a matter we care to talk about."

"Very well. Keep your secrets to yourself."

She turned a troubled glance on him. "I don't mean to be mysterious. But our people—well, it's a custom." She hesitated, then said impulsively, "You have been very good to me and if you wish I'll make you one of us. Then you'll know more than I could tell you."

Gardius grinned. "And would I become a lunatic?"

"If you accept our beliefs you will probably become as we are."

"No," said Gardius. "Religions, cults, rituals—even forms of insanity—have no interest for me."

"As you wish," she said coldly. "I must point out, however, that a person with a closed mind learns nothing."

Gardius laughed. "I have a very short life expectancy. I doubt if this new knowledge would be of much value."

"You might be right—and you might be wrong."

Gardius said, "If your knowledge or system—whatever you call it—is useful, why have you not extended it to the entire universe?"

"There are reasons. In the first place, we are afraid of the lowlanders and other predatory men."

Gardius said with a brittle overtone in his voice, "You don't fear Arman?"

She looked at him quickly. "But Arman is a hero—a new Evangel."

Gardius sneered, "You heard the Lord High Patroller. First an acrobat, then a religious cultist and a murderer of old women, then a slaver. Now you say he is a hero."

"Sometimes," said Mardien slowly, "a man's motives are misrepresented, sometimes his actions are distorted in the telling."

Gardius said, "I saw the corpses in Farees Village. I saw Arman's ship rise from the island with six hundred of my people in the hold. There is no way this action could be distorted to any further discredit."

"Sometimes," said Mardien, stammering, "a few must suffer that many shall gain . . ."

"Indeed," said Gardius, "and sometimes many must suffer that one shall gain."

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Mardien asked fervently, "Have you ever seen him, Gardius? Have you ever spoken to him? Have you ever looked into his eyes?"

Gardius said sourly, "No. You seem to have done all these things. You seem to know him very well."

She said coolly, "I do. I worship him."

Gardius said, "Then you must be as bad as he is—or crazy like the other Otros."

TWO human beings in a glass and metal hull, two personalities forced into physical intimacy—but the liking, the friendship, had soured. There was a chill in the cabin, a bleakness of withdrawn minds. Days passed and in the ship's automatic pilot the bead of liptivium edged closer to the socket in the viscous fluid that was the stereotype of space.

Then one day the bead snapped into place. The generators sang down a thousand unheard octaves, briefly through two or three audible ones, and the ship rippled across the shift into normal space.

Dead ahead hung a giant red star, Ramus, and in the telescope, glowing like a coal, spun the planet Fell.

The planet ballooned before their gaze. Gardius traced out the continents and conformations learned from the Directory. The peach-tan belt was the North Pole Desert, the magenta-green-brown expanse was the jungle in which the continent Kalhua wallowed like a foundering raft. On the western rim was the chief city, Huamalpai, and directly behind—a box on the raft—rose the plateau of the Alam Highlands.

Gardius set the boat down without delay. The field was in the flat country on the swampward side of Huamalpai—a dry plain dancing in the rosy light of Ramus. Huamalpai lay ten miles distant among low hills, which gave some slight protection against the raids of slavers.

Mardien packed her slight belongings with eager hands, glancing every ten seconds out the port toward the great palisade of rock that marked the edge of her homeland. Gardius saw her in a sudden new light—a girl very enthusiastic, very idealistic—and very young. He turned away with a faint flush of guilt warming his cheeks, busied himself with his dose of parabamin 67 to counter the effects of the highly oxygenated atmosphere.

There was a rap at the outer port. Gardius opened up, identified himself to the representatives of King Daurobanan. These were short flat-featured men with straight black hair worn in twin pigtails. Their uniform was a pair of loose shimmering blue breeches with a peculiar shoulder-ornament like great dragon-fly wings, serving no clear function. They were silent, quick, non-committal. Gardius paid the small port fee and the officials departed.

He threw the cape over his shoulder, clipped his pouch to his chest strap and was ready to leave. Mardien jumped to the ground, turned, waited while Gardius locked the ship.

Gardius joined her and there was a moment of awkward silence. Then she held out her hand. "Our lives seem to take us in different directions, Gardius."

The wind, raising dust-whirls on the field, stirred her yellow hair. Gardius swallowed hard, grasped her hand. Her eyes were moist. She fell against him with a throaty little sound. He held her against him, tight. A warm flood arose from somewhere.

"Mardien—I want something from life other than killing."

"Oh, Jaime," she used his name for the first time, "I wish it were simple!"

Over her shoulder, across the field, he saw a black ship with a bulldog bow and a big barrel of a cargo hold. The same ship that had lurched up from Great Farees, her belly full of slaves for Maxus—Arman's ship.

Mardien felt the quiver, felt his muscles tighten. She looked up, saw the expression on his face, followed his gaze.

His shoulders sagged, his arms dropped. "Our lives go in different directions." His life seemed bleak and hard and gray.

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She turned away slowly. "Good-by, Gardius. You've been very good to me."

"Thank my dead sister," said Gardius. "Thank Thalla."

"Goodby, Gardius." She moved slowly across the field to a ramshackle waiting room. Gardius saw her step into an air-car. It rose and took her through the rosy sky toward Huamalpai.

CHAPTER V

Huamalpai

GARDIUS stood on the ground, looking out toward the horizon with a sensation of physical release. Distance on all sides of him, and overhead the vast dome of the sky. After weeks in the cramped cabin he felt free, full of pent energy.

He walked past the air-cabs, through the open-air waiting pavilion and set out on foot.

The road led off across a barren plain pebbled with hard grey-green button fungus. Little puffs of dust, whirling wind-devils, spun in from the distance —stained pink, rose, red—wandered down the perspectives out of sight. Ahead, a dark finger of swamp pushed close.

When Gardius drew abreast he found the ground marshy and sour-smelling. Reeds in rusty clumps lined the road, streaming spider-web beards blown in from the deep jungle. The swamp retreated. The road turned, paralleled a plantation of mealie-grass.

Gardius walked on, whistling between his teeth, the feathery tufts swaying and bobbing above him. Arman and the Otros—why? It was a problem which intrigued him. Of course Arman was half-Otro. Half-crazy, then?

He considered the hints in the Directory. "Fanatics are these Otros in self-defense. They fear nothing and no one. They die cheerfully if only they can take one of the enemy with them. For all their personal eccentricities they cooperate magnificently in any crisis, such as when they expelled King Vauhau's army from North Alam Forest. Lowlanders impute supernatural abilities to the Otros—immortality, second sight and the like—and many strange stories are told about this peculiar race . . ."

In a sense the association fitted what he knew of Arman—a mystic with a conviction for destiny. Apparently Arman hoped to reinforce the dogma of his cult with the established Otro ritual. Immortality? Second sight? All religions grew from human dread of death, reflected Gardius—the brassier the claims for afterlife, the more popular the religion. Gardius smiled faintly as he walked. So this was Arman's dream—a net of minds across the galaxy.

But the smile faded, the frown returned. There were practical difficulties which even an irresponsible blackguard like Arman could not ovelook. In the first place the Overmen would never tolerate such an organization. They had the means to detect it—a net of spies and secret police. They had power to crush it—embargo, mass assassination and as a last resort formal military force.

Gardius stopped whistling. Even Arman could see the circle of contradiction. To organize a power bloc it was necessary to defeat the wealth, power and industrial mass of Maxus. And to defeat Maxus a vast industrial complex, a planetary organization, was necessary. It was a closed circle. Maxus was and therefore would be.

Gardius gazed with unseeing eyes down the dusty road. There was a syllogism hidden somewhere, a grouping of ideas which would clarify the issue. He shook his head. Too many factors were unknown. These he knew were variable.

He raised his eyes to the Alam Highlands. Mardien would be home now, among her family, her friends. Would she see Arman? Gardius scuffed his feet in the dust. Such thoughts were

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unsettling. They interfered with the impetus of his life. It had been—it was, he corrected himself—wonderfully simple, wonderfully easy.

First—kill Arman or bring him alive to Maxus. Second—seek out and kill as many other slavers as possible in the span of his life. Some men hunted wolves, some moon-tigers. Gardius would hunt slavers. He would assemble a gallery of their heads and it would be joy for him to walk along the glassy-eyed row.

A chugging, a clanking, sounded behind him. He jumped to the side of the road, turned around. A truck loaded with fat gray animals drew abreast. Gardius held up his hand. The truck wheezed, halted. The animals grunted and squealed.

The driver looked down from the high cab. "Where are you going?"

"Huamalpai," said Gardius.

"Climb aboard."

Gardius swung up the ladder, settled on the thin padding of the seat. The truck, a charcoal burner of local manufacture, gasped clouds of smoke and steam. The big drive wheels groaned into motion.

The driver was a man about his own age, slighter of build, with black hair worn in pigtails, a flat face. He was inclined to verbosity, and Gardius listened tolerantly to the flow of talk.

"... fifteen hectares next solstice we'll put in paddy. That's been demanded in Huamalpai and the meat-butts thrive on it. It's said the spiders keep their distance too since there's a rancid oil the leaf gives off but I've never seen the spider yet to be turned by an odor."

"Spiders?" asked Gardius.

The driver nodded emphatically. "They come in from the swamps for the meat-butts. They're monstrous—some of them. Others, of course, are no larger than my pet mishkin and then there's a kind of beast with eight legs—yellow-green on the belly and black on the legs—he can take a meat-butt under each of his two front legs and walk back to the jungle and there's nothing to it. . . ."

As they drove the country became more settled. The mealie grass, the dry plains were left behind. Vines and irrigated paddies lined the road. The little wooden huts were snug under roofs of shiny blue thatch. In the distance rose a group of hills along which the earth and wooden walls of Huamalpai spread, clung, dripped like pink frosting on a dark cake. Behind Huamalpai the Alam Palisade rose, two miles of black rock against the pink sky.

Noting the direction of Gardius' gaze the driver said, "That's the Alam Highlands." He paused, turning expectant bright eyes on Gardius.

Gardius said, "Isn't that where the Otros live?"

"Correct."

"I hear they're a strange sort of people."

The driver shrugged. "Crazy as sackbeetles. One man wears a red cloak with blue half-moons on it. Another man comes along in a cloak just like it. Do you know what happens?"

"No."

"They'll both tear off the cloaks, burn them, go home and make new ones in different colors and patterns. A man maybe sings or talks. Another man won't like it. He'll walk up and say 'Shut up!' Then what?"

"They fight?"

"No indeed. They shake hands. There's great laughter and merriment."

"What do they fight about?"

The driver shrugged. "For one thing, they won't take orders. And it's an insult to enter another man's house."

"I wonder why the reason for that?"

"Oh—just plain garden-variety craziness."

"How do they treat strangers?"

"Ignore 'em for a day or so, then chase 'em away. They like their isolation."

"Mmmmph."

"We Lowlanders don't go up there much. What we don't understand we don't like. It's even worse now."

"How so?"

The driver's flat forehead creased.

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"Well, it's hard to say." He hesitated.

Gardius said, "I've heard some loose talk."

The driver snorted, "It's probably true—whatever was said. They're a strange people and I wouldn't want anything to do with them—even if they weren't crazy. It's said they have no souls and so they're eager to steal one from a Lowlander and trade it around the community and all have the good of it."

GARDIUS made appropriate sounds of amazement.

"Now they say there's a great Evangel dropped down from space," said the driver, "and he's preaching miracles to 'em and they come from all over the Highlands to listen and sigh and cry like swamp-ghosts. Of course," he added modestly, "it's just what I hear but I get into town often and I'm not easily fooled."

Gardius asked, "How can a common man see with his own eyes?"

The driver considered. "There's any number of ways. He can walk the Fortitude Trail, straight up out of Huamalpai, or he can drive forty miles under the rim of the Palisade to Nuathiole Notch. There's a road that's passable to a car, only once up on the Highlands it's very poor, so I'm told—"

Gardius squinted up at the cliff. "Why not fly?"

The driver said, "That's the third method and I was just on my way to telling you. There's a hangar in Huamalpai that rents out copter-cars—slave-built on Maxus, I must tell you—and if you can pay the rent you can whisk up like a bird."

When the truck finally pulled into Huamalpai, Ramus hung low and angry red and the sky verged on magenta. Gardius alighted from the high cab, took leave of the driver.

He stood silent a moment, rubbing his chin, his eyes fixed on the rim of Alam Palisade.

Arman was so close. Why wait? He looked around him.

Up at the head of the street rose King Daurobanan's palace, a tremendous clutter of cupolas, panoplies, pilasters, balconies and rococo scroll-work. Nearer were the shops and markets, various places of business—all with square fronts of carved pale brown wood. Gardius stopped a passer-by, learned the whereabouts of the rental hangar.

He received directions, turned along the bank of a blood-colored river, passed an untidy line of piers and wharves poked helter-skelter out past the mud. By the time he found the hangar and rented an air-car night had come.

The sky was an eggplant shade with a lavender afterglow that put a dull sheen on the river.

THE copter controls were Maxus standard. Gardius lifted the car straight up through the warm air—up, up, up.

Huamalpai dropped below, an untidy straggle of houses up and down the hills.

Up, up, to the Alam Highlands. He passed the lip, peered curiously through the murk. The face of the countryside was blurred by darkness but he sensed a vast table-land rolling out to the horizon.

Spatters of light shone here and there—lights of all colors, twinkling reds, greens, blues, yellows, purples, as if every village were a great carnival.

Somewhere below was Arman. Where? Gardius scowled at the colored lights. Arman would conduct his affairs as quietly as possible for he would certainly be aware of the long reach of Maxus vengeance. If he were established among the Otros any inquiry from an outlander, no matter how casual, would excite suspicion.

Mardien would know where Arman kept himself. Probably she was at his side now. Find Mardien, there would be Arman. How to find Mardien? Drop down and ask? No—

Gardius thought of a way to locate Mardien.

He flung the bank arm over. The copter swooped, slanted back toward Huamalpai.

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CHAPTER VI

The Voice of Arman

GARDIUS once more hung above the Alam Highlands. On the seat beside him wabbled the clumsy bulk of a native-built transmitter.

He flipped the switch, dialed to 26.733 megacycles. Find Mardien, find Arman. The resonance of the penal circuit would guide him to Mardien—26.733 megacycles at low intensity. He meant to locate, not punish, not even disturb. He swiveled the antenna around the black rim of the horizon, listened.

Silence.

He steepened the flap-angle; the car took him up—high into the air. He tuned the transmitter again, listened, heard a faint *pip—pip—pip*. He increased the power and the sound strengthened. He lined the antenna against the compass—north and west—turned the car, followed the direction of the signal.

The signal grew louder as he flew and Gardius tuned down the power lest a tingling should alarm Mardien. Ten, twenty, thirty miles passed. Gardius looked off ahead. The Highlands were only fifty miles wide.

Another ten miles—and the antenna pointed down. He hovered, peered over the cheek of the dome. Darkness lay below, relieved by no sprinkle of many-colored lights such as marked towns elsewhere over the plateau. Nothing but the darkness of uninhabited country. He examined the transmitter skeptically. The dial was set correctly but was the dial calibrated to any exact standard?

The only way to find out was to land. And he looked without pleasure at the dark blur below. He thought of the night-scope—one of the Overmen's miracle instruments, through which night was like day. But they guarded the secret with all their monumental stealth. It was not for outland use.

[*Turn page*]

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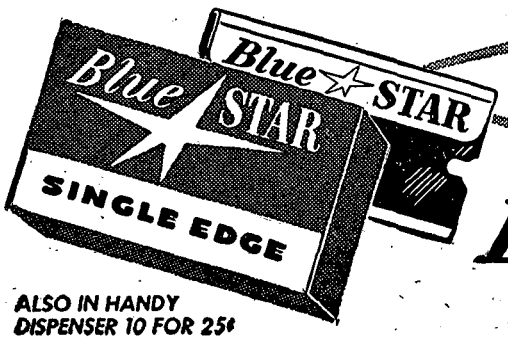

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Gardius squinted at the altimeter. It read two thousand feet above surface. The tactigraph needle flickered between 6 and 7—the density and texture of forest foliage.

He dropped the car on a steep slant. A thousand feet—five hundred—four hundred—three hundred—he caught the car up short. Directly below loomed an amorphous mass which seemed to boil and seethe—the crest of a giant tree.

Gardius moved uneasily in the seat. The copter engine made little noise—a rotary whirr—but the blades created a swish which might or might not be lost in the sounds of the forest.

He cautiously lowered the car. Darkness lay now on all sides, a trifle less dense to his right. The blades rattled through leaves on the left. He slanted to the right. The blades swung through soft air. He settled unhindered to solidity.

Gardius jumped to the ground, stood tensely beside the car—silent, looking into the darkness. The air was quiet, damp, smelled of an unfamiliar balsam—enough to remind him that he walked on a strange world.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he found that it was not quite complete, that rotting timber generated a phosphorescent blue glow along the ground.

Gardius hesitated. If he left the car he might never find it again. Once out of his range of vision—a hundred feet in the near-darkness—he might wander hours through the forest.

He climbed back in the cabin, sent out the feeblest of pulses at twenty-six and seven hundred thirty-three thousandths megacycles and the *pip—pip—pip* returned strong and sharp. He lined the antenna exactly, sat considering. His eye fell on the boat's compass, a cheap magnetic device and consequently useful for his purpose.

He wrenched the compass loose, lined it along the axis of the antenna. Northwest by north. . . .

He set out swiftly, walking with long strides over the spongy turf. His footprints glared sudden angry blue behind him.

He was not sure how far or how long he walked. The dim blue light showed him black boles on all sides, rising cleanly, without branches, and the wood was hard and cold as metal. His feet crunched through brittle fungus, sank into humus. Several times he stepped on heavy tendrils and it was as if he were stepping on a human arm.

A pinkish-yellow glow waxed before him, rising from the ground. Gardius advanced slowly and the light spread in front of him, illumined the first fronds of foliage sixty feet above.

The forest ended, the ground fell away. Gardius looked over a lip of rock into a natural sandy amphitheater. A tent of dull red cloth held the light down. Rows of benches curved around a platform built of rough black planks with a carved railing. The benches were three-quarters full of men and women.

Gardius studied the people. They were tall, well-formed, with straight regular features. The Otros of the Alam Highlands, the crazy Otros—were they crazy? Gardius found it hard to assume differently. The clothes of each individual were completely different in style and color from those of all others.

IT was like a masque ball, like the carnival suggested by the colored lights of the Otro towns. One man wore a jerkin of pale green leather, bronze satin trousers—another white pantaloons and a voluminous purple blouse. Here a woman was cinctured in gold ribbons—there another wore a pleated robe of blue silk—another a gray coverall with yellow gores down the legs and black epaulets.

The head-dresses were equally distinctive—arrangements of bronze bristles, balls of red puff, feathers, helmets of metal and transparent sheets. In bewilderment Gardius looked from face to face. Perhaps the occasion was one of festivity. No, the people were uniformly serious.

Gardius looked along the faces. There was nothing to hint at insanity in the

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faces, nothing to indicate supernatural power either. In spite of the fantastic dress he found a serenity, a relaxation and calm that smoothed the faces, gave them a youthful cast. Where was Arman? Where was Mardien? Somewhere in the audience?

He scanned the circumference of the arena. There were no ushers, no guards, no gatemen. Newcomers to the audience aroused no attention. A strange costume should evoke no notice here, thought Gardius. His gray flight-suit would be conspicuous only by its lack of color. He stepped out into the pink-yellow glow, walked down an aisle, took a seat. No one heeded him. A half dozen middle-aged women sat in front of him and he was amused to hear their speech. Otros or not, it was the talk of women on any planet in the galaxy.

" . . . so gracious, Teresha said. He actually held her hand and she says his touch made her shiver all over."

"Teresha's not always to be believed, you know."

"I've a mind to invite him to the nocturne . . ."

"I doubt if he'd come. He keeps so busy, studies all the time. He reads eight ancient languages . . ."

The benches filled quickly. The amphitheater soon was crowded. An old woman in a lime-yellow martingale, wearing a sheaf of roses in her hair, sat on one side of Gardius. A youth of fifteen in a green coat sat on the other. Neither gave him a second glance.

A pink-white spotlight played on the platform and Arman appeared. A half-heard hiss came from the crowd. Arman—Gardius' breath became shallow with the rigidity of his attention. Arman—a man of magnificent stature and beauty with a brain radiating certainty and intelligence. His face was the composite of a thousand champions, all the heroes on all the medallions.

Arman's voice was somber, rich, melodious, giving urgency to the most ordinary sentence. And he enhanced the urgency by a trick of speaking with his head down, looking into the eyes of his audience. Observing the man, Gardius could understand Mardien's reluctance to think evil of him. Physiognomically he was one of the archangels, radiant with *virtu*.

"Men and women of the future," said Arman, "tomorrow our great adventure begins. Tomorrow we leave the Highlands." He paused, swung his eyes around the amphitheater. Gardius felt the momentary impact. Arman continued in a slow voice.

"I have not much to tell you. Even here in the forest, with you summoned by personal call, I fear the eyes and ears of Maxus and I must restrain much of what is in the mind of the God."

Gardius stirred in his seat. God? What God?

Arman spoke on in great swinging phrases, like an inspired artist laying color on a canvas. His theme was less political than spiritual and even Gardius himself felt troubled as he listened. The enthusiasm, the fire, would be hard to counterfeit. If Arman believed in his preachings . . . Stonily Gardius sat listening.

Man had lost hope, said Arman, had lost faith in the destiny which once had sent him to the reaches of the galaxy. A new focus was needed, a new flame to fire men's hearts, a new crusade.

"A crusade is launched by crusaders," said Arman softly, "and they will be you who go with me tomorrow. And the centrality, the focus—that is in me. Call it God—Fate—Destiny—Purpose—it is in me. It gives me tongue. It makes me what I am.

"As I see you before me, this God, this Destiny, looks from my eyes. When I speak, the God speaks. The pronouncement is: Cast off the rags of life, wear the golden clothes of the new universe. Humanity sinks in the mire. Maxus wallows in wine and orgy, eats the fat from the backs of its victims. Maxus is a great leech which sucks life, and humanity staggers.

"The old frontiers are falling back, the far colonies are prey to beasts. Plague takes one world. On another the people grow old, feeble, they dwindle, die, and their pitiful ruins are lost

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among the stars." Arman raised his voice, and the skin prickled up and down Gardius' neck.

"We set our faces to resolution. We purge the universe. We infuse with our ardent liquor! We thrust down the leech, grind it to pulp. They who enslaved shall be the slaves, they shall sweat, toil and die as their slaves have died! We build in the name of Arman the God! Our bricks are human minds, our mortar is the Otro way, our completed structure will be a new universe!"

Arman stood back, breathing heavily. The crowd sighed—a high-pitched gust from the diaphragm. And Gardius moved fretfully, annoyed by the rasp between his mind and his emotions. First Mardien, now Arman—both conspired to blur the clarity of his intentions.

Arman said in a low voice, "Tomorrow we leave the planet, we embark on our great adventure. You who come shall see a strange world. You shall see the dark elegant rot of an old culture which bases itself on evil. You who stay shall prepare—prepare and learn, build and wait.

"Together we shall see great events. It is history we are living this night on the Alam Highlands—we who have met here in the forest are the pulsing spark of the future."

CHAPTER VII

Quest End

GARDIUS sat numbly in a kind of auto-hypnosis. Through a gauze mesh he saw the spot flicker away from Arman, heard the crowd arise, leave. There was something in the wind. A crusade, against Maxus, against the great slave state itself. And the crusaders—an amphitheater-full of queerly dressed men and women? Ridiculous. Arman was as crazy as his kin.

But was he? Perhaps Mardien had told the truth. Perhaps Arman's motives had been misrepresented. Perhaps Arman was acting on a scale to which six hundred lives were as nothing. Perhaps Arman was the God, the Destiny—whatever he called himself. Perhaps Gardius was the irresponsible iconoclast.

Indecision was worse than torture. His life had been so clear-cut. There had been no doubt and now . . . Yet in the core of his mind a set of words rang, struggled to reach his consciousness.

Gardius stirred; the daze dissipated. Words—a phrase—what was it? The key to his dilemma. He bent his head into his hands, sat a moment rubbing his chin. Somewhere Arman had lifted the curtain and a flicker had penetrated through. Recollection came. Gardius rose to his feet, stared at the platform. The crowd had left the arena. Arman had departed. He became aware of another presence, of a suspicious scrutiny. He glanced at the fifteen-year-old boy who had sat beside him. They were almost alone in the slowly fading glow.

The boy said, "You are no Otro." It was a flat statement.

Gardius said without rancor or haste, "How do you know?"

The boy said, "I see it in your face, in the troubled lines of the death-men. I read it in the blankness of your mind, which has a surface like the Granite Desert. You are no Otro."

"Then what?"

"If you are a Maxus spy you will be killed."

"If I were a Maxus spy how would I have found my way to this gathering?"

The boy shook his head, backed away. Gardius saw that he was ready to shout for assistance. The arena was empty but men would not be far distant.

Gardius said, "Well, we'll see whether I'm a spy or not. We'll go to Arman."

The boy hesitated. "You wish to see Arman? Are you leaving tomorrow?"

"Possibly," said Gardius. "We haven't decided yet."

The boy stood watching Gardius from the corners of his eyes.

"Let us go to Arman," said Gardius. "You are more familiar with the forest. You lead the way."

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The boy stared at Gardius, who did not fit his mental picture of a spy. Spies were small, shifty-eyed, full of false smiles. Gardius was large, lean, sinewy like a tree-tiger. . . .

"I'll tell you where to find Arman," he said indecisively. "I won't take you there."

The arrangement suited Gardius very well. "As you wish."

The boy changed his mind. "No, I'll take you myself. Then I'll know that everything's all right. I'm a Junior Engineer," he added self-consciously.

"Excellent," said Gardius. "And what is your role in the great adventure?"

"Oh!" The boy chose his words carefully. "I will translate the ideas to accurate drawings. That is my specialty."

Gardius nodded. "I see, I see. And now, take me to Arman."

The boy hesitated. "Perhaps I'd better take you to my father and let him decide."

Gardius stroked his chin as if he were deliberating. "No," he said at last, "I have little time. It would be better to go to Arman directly."

The boy wavered. He had never been in Arman's presence, had never exchanged words with the great man. Perhaps this would be an occasion. "Follow me," he said.

They left the arena, threaded a path which crossed a paved road and plunged again into the woods. They walked five minutes. The forest lost its density. They came out into an open area. In the east a bright planet shone like a monstrous rosy pearl. Gardius saw that they were on a rolling heath. Wind blew into his face, smelling strongly of the swamp. Ahead glowed the lights of a small cottage.

The youth came to a sudden indecisive halt. Would he be thanked, bringing a stranger to disturb the hero? And what if this grim black-haired man were an enemy, a Maxus spy? His blood curdled.

"We've come the wrong way," said the boy huskily. "We'd better go back, into the forest. I'll take you to my father."

Gardius reached almost casually, caught the nape of the boy's neck in one hand, felt between the muscles, squeezed. The youth froze, arms dangling woodenly, legs barely supporting him. Gardius fumbled in his pouch, withdrew a palm-injector—a small sac of drug with a sting-needle. His hold relaxed. The boy's arm flew up in a reflex motion, knocking the injector from Gardius' hand. He cried out hoarsely.

Gardius clamped his teeth, tightened the grip. The boy froze. Where was the injector? He forced the limp youth to the ground, felt here and there among the tangle of gorse with his one free hand.

FIVE minutes passed before he found it, wedged in a crotch. He slapped it on the boy's neck. The boy stiffened. Gardius released his hold. The boy lay still.

Gardius stood waiting in the dark. The cry had evidently gone unheard, blown away by the rank-smelling breeze. He stole toward the cottage—a farmhouse with a marvelously high gable, oval windows and a door in the shape of three discs.

The windows seeped cracks and points of golden light but gave no vision within. Gardius circled the house, passed hutches, sheds, outbuildings. He found a rear entrance and the room behind seemed to be dark.

He pulled at the latch. As he expected the door was barred. He dipped into his pouch for a heat-pencil and, choking in the quick smoke, burnt a hole around the latch. He reached through the glowing splinters, slid back the bar, put his shoulder to the door, inched it open.

The room was dark and smelled of spoiled fruit. A frame of light revealed another door opposite. Gardius beamed a flashlight around, crossed the room swiftly, stealthily.

No sound from within, no voices, no rustle of movement. Heat-pencil in one hand, Gardius swung open the door.

Arman sat on a bench by the fireplace, brooding into the flames. He was alone.

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Gardius stepped quietly forward. Arman sensed his presence, glanced up.

"Silence," said Gardius, showing the heat-pencil. Arman rose to his feet, stood quietly watching. His presence was tremendous, disconcerting. Gardius asked himself—should he pull the trigger? It would be easier in the long run. But Arman brought alive to Maxus would be more valuable than Arman dead on Fell. There were not only Gardius' brother and sister but many of his friends whom Arman alive might ransom.

"Turn around," said Gardius. Arman obeyed, watching over his shoulder with great luminous eyes until he had almost turned completely.

Gardius approached carefully. There was power in Arman's buttressed spread of shoulder. Grips were undependable against such a sheath of sinew. He reached out, flicked Arman's neck with the palm-injector.

From behind came a thin wail of surprise and fear. Backing away from the stiffening Arman, Gardius saw a woman in a far doorway. She wore black slacks, a white blouse with green frogs. She was blond as Exar sunlight. With a little wrench at his heart Gardius saw it was Mardien.

Arman crumpled. Gardius said to Mardien, "Come in quickly. I'd as soon kill you as not."

She came forward, her eyes filmed with a peculiar dead glaze. "Kill me?" Her voice was puzzled. "Why?"

Gardius glared, at a loss for reply. The answer to her question was somehow related to the pang he had felt on seeing her in Arman's cottage. Mardien stared at the prone hero and one hand went to her throat.

She asked, "Have you killed him—so soon?"

"No, he is not dead."

"Now what will you do?"

"Take him to Maxus, trade him for my brother, my sister, as many more of my friends as possible."

"But they will torture him!" She looked back at Gardius and the film was leaving her eyes.

Gardius shrugged, glanced down a the great body. "He should have though of that before he became a slaver. H can stand a lot of it."

Mardien came forward. "Gardius— *Jaime!* You don't understand! You can' you're not that bad! Here is the hope o the universe, here in Arman! Woul you be so cruel?"

Gardius made a grim sound, hal chuckle, half snort. "Perhaps you ar blind. Perhaps you are a dupe."

She said, white-faced, wide-eyed "There's nothing behind what you sa but your emotions."

Gardius made the sardonic soun again. "The same words apply to you.'

"But I know! I *know!*" she said be tween clenched teeth.

Gardius shrugged. "He spoke of leav ing tomorrow. Why? And where?"

She hesitated, then the answer an grily burst through her lips. "To Max us with six hundred of my people That's how much we believe in Arman Six hundred of my people have volun teered themselves."

"Volunteered? For what?"

"Volunteered their bodies for slav ery."

Gardius stood rigid, eyes probing hers. "Why?"

She looked away. "I have said too much."

Gardius said slowly, "Do I understand that six hundred Otros are allowing themselves—voluntarily—to be sold as slaves?"

"Yes!" defiantly. "You do."

"And Arman collects their value?"

"Yes."

"Now I know you're crazy—all of you."

"You're a fool!" snapped Mardien. "The money buys technical equipment —for factories, power plants, tools."

"Who will work these factories?"

"We Otros."

"And who will feed you when your farms lie fallow?"

"The Lowlanders. We will buy food."

"And who will protect your industries from Maxus?"

"We will have a screen like the screen

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around Maxus."

"That," said Gardius, "is one of the best-kept secrets on all Maxus—how to screen a planet."

MARDIEN smiled frostily. "Once the Otros are slaves on Maxus, Maxus will have no more secrets. Those who go are technically trained."

Gardius stood frowning. "I don't understand you."

"Naturally. You are not an Otro."

"No," said Gardius. "I'm not. How will you get these secrets off the planet?"

"That is one of *our* secrets. It will be done. We will seek out every formula, every item of structural design, every circuit, every phase of advanced knowledge on Maxus. And here in the Alam Highlands we will recreate the secrets.

"We will screen Fell away from the Maxus warships until we have warships of our own. Then we will expand, take our techniques to the other planets. Maxus will be dwarfed before us."

"Very imaginative," said Gardius drily. He leaned back against the wall. "But why exchange the occasional predations of Maxus for the tyranny of this"—he nudged Arman with his foot—"this slaver, this murderer?"

"There will be no tyranny under Arman!"

Gardius shook his head slowly. "You trusting innocent! Even when Arman's tongue slips, when he says 'the slavers shall be the slaves'—you still have faith."

"'The slavers shall be the slaves,'" she repeated slowly, bewildered. "You were at the meeting."

"Yes."

"What do you mean then?"

"I mean that you conceivably might create an industrial system but that you'll need many more millions of men to control it than there are on Fell. Are you aware how complicated a warship of space is? How many man-years of labor go into building even a cruiser?"

"No," she said faintly.

"And how many man-years of labor go into merely building the machinery, the equipment, the jigs that are necessary just to get started?"

"We'll start out on a small scale."

"There's no such thing as a small scale. It's either big or it doesn't exist at all. It takes forty million Overmen merely to superintend the Maxus industries. And there are only a few million of you. Where will all this additional man-power come from? Arman gave you the answer in his speech. It leaps to his mind since he's a slaver by profession. Slaves!

"Another thing—while your industrial system is expanding do you think the Overmen will go to sleep? They're realists. They'll expand with you, faster than you. They'll build more factories, enslave more planets—and they've got a two-thousand-year head-start.

"If your plot succeeds, you don't win—nobody wins. Everybody loses. There won't be merely Maxus ravaging the planets for men—there'll be the slavers from Fell. Two industrial systems, competing for galactic markets to buy enough food to feed their slaves."

"No, no, *no!*" cried Mardien. "That's not our plan at all."

"Of course not," Gardius said mildly. "You're an idealist. The idealists are always the revolutionaries, the cat's-paws. Then the realists consolidate, compromise, liquidate the opposition."

They stood looking at each other across the room, each pressed against the wall like caryatides—and between them lay the prone idol. She said in a subdued voice, "What do you propose, then? You try to destroy my faith but you offer me nothing."

Gardius said quietly, "I'm sorry. I can't offer any pleasant solutions—except to make slaving so dangerous that things like this"—he nudged Arman with his foot—"will stick to acrobatics. I've lined out my life in this direction. I'm beginning with the slaver that robbed me of my family—Arman.

"After I give him to the Lord High Patroller at Alambar there will be no more quarter. I'll kill them as I come to them." His voice took on a harsh brilliance. "Like scorpions!"

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He noted a strange pallor on Mardien's face, noted the direction of her gaze. It was fixed in horrified fascination on the floor.

Too late he stepped back. Movement surged from the floor, a swift supple massiveness struck him at the waist, hurled him thudding full length. The heat-pencil clattered to the planks of the floor. Mardien gasped, ran forward to seize it.

Gardius kicked from where he lay, caught Arman in the abdomen. He caught sight of Mardien, her face twisted in an agony of doubt. Skin shone where flesh pressed against bone—teeth were white against gray lips. Her eyes were wide, the glaze flickered across her vision.

Gardius saw her decision, twisted aside as a sputtering needle of red light charred the floor beside him.

He jumped to his feet, dodged behind the gasping Arman, caught up a stool, flung it at Mardien. She crumpled to the floor. Gardius twisted back to Arman, who was coming at him with a blazing face, a roaring mouth.

CHAPTER VIII

Food for the Spiders

IT was weight, strength and fury against furious craft, and furious strength. Arman had experience from relentless cities of man. Gardius was a mountaineer of Exar. It was like a contest between bull and black panther. Arman's endurance was marvelous. It seemed to flood from a superhuman reservoir. He strove more violently than the warier Gardius, yet when Gardius' vision swam pink Arman seemed fresh, eager, full of resource.

He lunged across the room—Gardius staggered away. Arman swung an arm like a club, missed. Gardius caught the arm, jerked, applied leverage—and Arman slammed prone to the floor. For the first time he lay still an instant, and in that instant Gardius had stepped forward, kicked his head. Arman groaned hollowly. His hands clenched, his nails scraped the floor.

Mardien was moving on hands and knees toward the heat-pencil; Gardius threw himself forward, recovered it, backed away.

He stood panting, eyes swimming, heart pounding, knees like loose hinges, a hundred bruises throbbing, blood dripping from cheek and mouth and chin. Mardien sat on the floor, glaring, and Gardius caught a glimpse of a primordial beast. It was the swiftest of glimpses and he thought what marvelous disguise were beauty and an aeon of civilization.

"You're as bad as he is," he panted. "You're his mistress."

She said, "You're jealous—that's why you hate him, that's why you hate me. You're *jealous!*"

"You don't deny it," said Gardius in a voice that sounded queer to his ears. The words weren't even those he wanted to say.

"If I were—if I am," she corrected herself, "it's nothing I am ashamed of."

He did not answer. Silence held the group, time froze while all three kept their attitudes—Arman lying with great arms sprawled, Mardien sitting tautly, Gardius propped panting against the wall. His eye fell on the palm-injector—why had it not immobilized Arman?

He reached, picked it up, examined it. The needle was broken, the sac was empty. He stood stiffly a moment, considering. Events were getting too big for him, jostling and crowding past his control. Where was the boy? Was he drugged? Had he fled for help?

Arman groaned now, shook his head painfully and slowly propped himself on his arms.

"Sit still," said Gardius. Arman slowly looked up at him. "Hold your arms behind you."

Arman obeyed expressionlessly. Gardius bent forward with a roll of adhesive tape. A thin bony thing sprang on his back, pinioned his arms.

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Here was the boy.

Arman sprang forward, seized the heat-pencil. The boy stood back now, babbling explanations to Arman.

". . . knew he was up to no good the minute I saw him. Thought it best to keep an eye on him—anything to help you, Lord Arman. . . ."

Arman stood eyeing Gardius speculatively. Gardius waited with arms folded, waited to be killed. Mardien stood feeling the bruises where the stool had struck her, watching without expression.

Arman turned suddenly to the boy. "Outside, behind the house, in an air-car. In the tail-locker is a long rope."

"Yes, sir."

"Get it."

The boy ran off, returned a moment later.

"Tie his wrists together," said Arman. "In back of him."

Arman picked up the tail of the rope. "Outside," he told Gardius. To Mardien, "Bring the fellow's flashlight."

HE marched Gardius to the air-car, tied the tail of the rope to the under-frame. Gardius stiffened. When the car rose he would be suspended by his wrists—which were tied behind his back. The weight of his body would wrench his arms around backwards in their sockets, until his body dangled helplessly below the arms.

Arman turned to the boy. "Can you pilot?"

"Yes, Lord Arman. . . ."

"Take him out over the swamp, cut the rope."

The boy laughed half-hysterically. "Yes, sir. Food for the spiders, that's how he'll end up."

Mardien, a white-face wraith, clung to Arman's elbow. "Arman—we can't torture him—"

"Let go," said Arman brusquely. "He's a Maxus spy."

"No he isn't, not really. And even if he were—we can't torture, Arman. . . ."

He turned his head ominously. "Shut up! Get back in the house if you don't like it!"

She looked at him a frozen instant, then turned, walked quickly away.

"Take off," said Arman. "Make sure of him."

"Don't worry, Lord Arman. I live only to serve you."

"Good. I'll remember you."

The boy jumped into the cabin. Gardius eyed the rope. Arman had been generous with slack. The blades swung, air gusted down, the cab rose. Gardius threw himself on his back, twined his ankle around the rope. Up into the night went the copter and below it, head-down, dangled Gardius. Uncomfortable, thought Gardius, but not so uncomfortable as hanging from back-twisted arms during his last hours.

Arman shouted angrily but the boy did not hear. The car flew off through the night swinging Gardius crazily below. The light from the open door of the cottage dwindled to three golden disks—a line—nothing.

How long they flew, Gardius, with blood pounding in his head, could not reckon. Concentrate on consciousness—if he fainted his legs would relax, the rope would slip past his ankles, he would tumble sideways to hang as Arman wanted him to hang. Time went on. The wind rushed past Gardius' face, buffeted him back and forth. He was dimly aware of the dark steady shape above, the night, the blankness below, the ripe opulent pearl that was Fell's moon. These were the elementals of a new existence. Life seemed far back and distant, a shout in a sunlit dream.

So Gardius was borne head-down through the darkness, riding the wind like some peculiarly clownish witch. His breathing was difficult. His eyes bulged. He clung to consciousness with slowly slipping clutch.

The cab hovered. A thousand feet below spread the swamp, utterly black save for the faint occasional sheen of water. Gardius sensed the boy's head looking down, faintly heard the words over the rush of the down-draft.

"Now see this? It's a knife. I cut the rope, down you go. Spider-food." He laughed. "A long way down, a long walk

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home. If I let you down easy you'll enjoy your walk—and you'll have spiders to give you directions."

The cab settled swiftly, the horizons rose like black liquid in a vast bowl of purple glass. Twenty feet now and Gardius almost swung into foliage.

"Hope you enjoy your walk," cried the boy. "There's only a hundred miles and you've lots of time." Gardius felt the rope vibrate. The strands parted—one, two, three. He fell—through leaves and crackling twigs into a cluster of great globelike seed-pods. Some popped below him, others jarred loose, rose and drifted off through the darkness, slightly luminous, like bubbles full of bright smoke.

Gardius lay limp, half-conscious, devoid of will, drive, recollection.

FELL'S short night ebbed, retreated before the plum-colored dawn. Gardius quivered, aroused by the emerging silhouettes of the jungle fronds which, stirring in the breeze, rubbed and scraped and rustled in a million small sounds.

Painfully he stretched his legs, jerked himself into a more comfortable position, began to work at his bonds. He could feel the rope at his finger-tips. A strand at a time he pulled it apart. At last he yanked and the rope parted.

He reached out his hand, helped himself to an upright position on a limb. With caution he tested his bones, grunting whenever he found a bruise. Nothing seemed broken. He craned his neck, peered at the ground. The light had not penetrated. It was still indistinct below him.

He considered the trunk of the shrub. Then, remembering the spiders, he hesitated. Searching through the branches he spied a tangle of webbing. He tossed a twig into the web and a black thing the size of a cat scuttled out from the the shadows hand over hand, pounced on the twig—then slowly, regretfully, casting the twig aside, it returned to its dim lair.

Gardius eased his arms and legs, made himself more comfortable on the limb. He was alive—which was more than he had expected. From the branches of the globe tree he could see about fifty feet before his gaze was lost in gray-green and plum-colored tangle. The air smelt of dank mud, with traces of animal musk and a sweet vegetal rot.

Ramus, the red sun, floated higher. Gardius moved from his perch, climbed a trifle higher in the branches. A throaty screech rang out through the jungle, followed by a great crashing. Gardius froze, physically afraid for the first time since he had awaked to consciousness.

After a moment he climbed another few feet and more of the great globes which served as seed-pods jostled loose, floated off into the red sunlight.

Gardius looked through his pouch. A long knife with a collapsible blade, a spare power-pack for his heat-pencil, the useless palm-injector sac, a dry razor, money, an elastic sling for shooting poison darts, a dozen darts, a box of vitamin tablets. Very little to help him across a hundred miles of slime, tangle and thicket—nothing to feed him. He wondered about the spiders. He had no means to build a fire. He'd have to eat them raw.

He looked off in the direction of land. Today Arman left for Maxus with six hundred Otros. Today at what time—morning, noon, night? Gardius looked around at the jungle, up at the rosy sky, down at the muck.

Arman, Mardien, the Otros, Maxus—they had dwindled in importance, like events seen through the wrong end of a telescope. What if Arman did leave today? Today, tomorrow, yesterday—it was all the same to a man swallowed and gone. He changed his position. His movements disturbed more of the bubbles which, rising, were caught in the breeze and carried off.

Gardius starred at the globes, at the spider web, and there was a sudden shift in his thinking. Perspectives snapped into different alignments, time took on significance. When was it that Arman left Fell? Hurry, Gardius told himself, hurry. He wanted to live.

Hours later he took a last look around

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the little clearing. To one side lay the tangle of brush he had cut. On the other was a heap of dead spiders—dozens of all sizes, from sand-colored things the size of his hand—these were agile with springy legs—to an obese monster almost as large as himself.

This one he had fought twenty sweaty minutes, using his knife and the fire-spear built from his power-pack and a long pole. The spider's two big eyes were an exact fit between the bared terminals. Gardius had blinded the creature almost at once but there was a remorseless life in the thing and it had been able to detect Gardius almost as well without eyes.

With maddening hateful obstinacy it chased him around the steaming muck of the clearing. Gardius hacked at its legs as he retreated. Finally it had tottered in a hairy spindle-legged heap and Gardius had collapsed, panting, at the trunk of the globe-tree.

Now he turned his back on the clearing. Overhead swung a tall cluster of globes, hundreds and hundreds, each secured by a length of spider web to a central cord.

There was nothing to hold him longer. He slipped into the seat he had cut from a piece of rotten stump, reached below him, slashed with his knife. The anchor line sang apart and the balloon took Gardius up, away from the dank ground, away from the clearing with the heap of dead spiders, up into the red light of Ramus.

The breeze caught him, took him off toward land.

CHAPTER IX

The Revenant

ALL day he drifted. The wind sweeping in toward the hot plains of the continent bore him without pause. He estimated his speed at ten to fifteen miles per hour. A hundred miles? Eight to ten hours—night. Too late. He strained in the harness, looked ahead through the rosy shimmer—nothing but the vast bowl of muck, leaves, branches.

Ramus crossed the sky, rolled down along the horizon, and at last he saw the violet loom of mountains ahead, shimmering like tinsel. Now the full purport of his existence returned, the full urgency of his haste. But the wind blew no faster, indeed came more slowly as evening approached and Gardius was still wafted in on silky air.

Night settled before he saw the regular rectangles of cultivated land beneath him. Instantly he slashed loose a dozen globes and sank to the ground.

Aching, angry, exultant, impatient, he stood on hard soil in one of the wind-swept fields buttoned with fungus pebbles. His cluster of bubbles disappeared into the night. He trotted across the field, jumped a ditch, circled a section of mealie grass, found a road. In the distance glimmered a cluster of lights.

Footsore, haggard, hungry, thirsty, Gardius entered the village. At a tavern with lumpy earthen walls he halted.

[*Turn page*]

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A sign suspended over the road read *Caunbal Cheer* with a fluorescent fish in green and yellow below.

Gardius pushed open the plank door, entered a room pungent with the smell of food and drink. He let himself fall into a chair at a long table and a fat expressionless woman, at his order, brought him stew, bread and frothy yellow beer. He crammed his mouth, gulped the beer, searched around the room. "Where's the telephone?" he asked the woman.

Her dark face wrinkled in a spasm of simple mirth. She pointed over his head. "It almost hangs in your hair."

He stood up, thumbed through the directory, dialed. The line wheezed, a voice said, "Spaceport, Jeotsa speaking."

"Did Arman's ship take off today?"

There was a pause, then: "Yes, she's gone. Left this afternoon."

Gardius' shoulders sagged. He was unable to move or speak. The voice at the other end said, "The rumor is that it only shifted up to Alam somewhere. Maybe she's still on the planet. So far as I know there's no space-field up there and I don't know where he'd land. The Otros are fussy about hot ground."

"Where's their largest airfield?"

"They don't have any. Cars sometimes set down at Solveg."

Gardius hung up. He called across the room to the fat woman, "Where can I get an air-car?"

Her face showed interest. "My son —he will fly you anywhere. But money —where is your money?"

Gardius growled. "He'll get paid. Get him out in front fast."

He thrust more food into his face, drank beer until the hum and swish of blades sounded outside the window.

He laid silver down on the table, ran outside, jumped into the car. "Up over the Alam Highlands. To Solveg, if you know where that is."

THE pleateau showed dark rolling hills and valleys sprinkled with the colored lights of a vast unreal toyland.

The driver said, "That's Solveg and that's the field. Do you want me to land?"

"No—just fly low."

In the light of the moist pink satellite the field lay bare. Gardius said, "Go north, out to the far corner of the highlands."

They flew twenty minutes. The villages drifted below them. Then came the dark forest and at last the open moor where Arman's high-peaked cottage stood. A hundred yards distant bulked the black ship. Light glowed dimly from the entrance port and from one or two bull's-eyes. Otherwise the ship was dead.

"Put me down," said Gardius. "Quietly."

It occurred to him that he carried no weapons. He asked the pilot, "Do you have a gun—heat-pencil, exploder, ionic, anything at all? I'll pay you a good price."

The pilot inspected him sharply, sidelong. "No. Why do you need a weapon?" Then, as if regretting the boldness of his question—for Gardius with his stained clothes, gaunt bruised face, hot eyes, invited no familiarity—he turned quickly away.

Gardius made no answer. The car settled to the ground. Gardius pulled a note from his pouch. "Does that pay you?"

The pilot mumbled assent, took quickly to the air.

Gardius stood looking at the black ship, swaying slightly. He should be keen, vigorous—but his vision was clouded and his arms and legs seemed heavy, dropsical. Fatigue clouded his brain with listlessness.

He had no weapon but his knife and Arman was secure, arrogant, in the black ship. He heard footsteps, harsh and decisive on the gravel. Stepping back into the shadow he saw two men approach the ship, enter. From within he heard the clang of metal.

Gardius passed a hand across his face. Time—he needed time to rest, to gather his wits. But there was no time.

He steadied his mind, rallied strength from the core of his resolution. His knife was enough—it would kill as quickly

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as a heat-pencil. And when Arman was dead there was the air-car, still waiting in the woods, and his space-boat at Huamalpai space-field—and then space.

He took a deep breath, stretched his cramped shoulder muscles. First to reconnoiter the cottage. . . .

As he approached his caution waned and an unreasoning anger came over him. Reconnoiter? No. Open the door, walk in. Arman would be expecting no such visitor.

Up the pathway he walked and the crazy high-peaked roof towered over him—up the crazy triple-disk door. He pushed the latch, the disks swung inward, two to the right, one to the left. Light flooded his face.

A stride took him to the middle of the room. He searched the corners, behind the long looping furniture. The room was empty. He opened each of the doors, listened. A drop of water from one, a whisper of wind from another, silence from a third.

Gardius returned outside, looked across the field to the ship. Arman must be aboard. With Mardien? With six hundred Otros? Alone? The ship had about it a look of imminence as if it were already drawing itself away from the ground. Gardius approached through the mulberry darkness. He could either enter the ship or he could wait by the entrance.

Like a ghost he climbed the ramp, looked into the ship. Before him was a corridor lined with lockers. A man in a light green apron was pushing bundles of fruit stalk into a chute. Gardius slipped off one of his sandals, stepped forward, hit him over the head. The man slumped. Gardius peeled off his apron, pulled it over his own stained clothes, gagged the man with a handkerchief, tied his wrists with a belt, knotted his sandals together, thrust him in a locker.

HE looked around to get his bearings. Above him the ceiling bowed down, convex—the floor of the central core of machinery which ran the length of the ship. Around the periphery were ramps. At the end of the corridor rose the passenger holds, communicating with the corridor where he stood by ramps. At the end of the corridor rose the double ladder to the control dome and the crew's quarters.

Gardius cracked open a door into one of the holds. A sound of multitudinous breathing came to his ears. He closed the door. Six hundred Otros, drugged and stowed for the passage. Six hundrew crazy Otros.

He half-walked, half-ran along the corridor and, knife in hand, climbed the ladder. The control dome was empty.

A blue light on the panel glowed brightly. Underneath white letters read *Ready*. Gardius, his head thrust forward like a hunting beast, looked here, there. Where was Arman? The crew?

He drew back the panel leading to the catwalk down the central core. Now he heard voices, saw a half-dozen men standing around a turbine while one of them tightened a stud with a wrench. Repairs. Where was Arman? In the huddle of dark figures? He could not be sure. There was one there, a big man who might be—

Arman came up the ladder behind him. Gardius heard the pad of feet, sprang around, his knife glittering.

Arman had a weapon leveled. He smiled, an exaggerated smile, almost a grimace. His teeth shone like wedges of ice. "Stand still, man—stand still." He lowered his head, peered. "*You!* You again?" His expression changed. "I thought I had you safely killed."

Gardius swayed a trifle, looking from the weapon to Arman's face. Death—perhaps this is what he had been looking for, rushing forward so blindly. Death would ease all his troubles. This was a weak thought, yielding. He took a small step forward.

"Stand still," said Arman. "Tell me, did not that boy obey me?"

"Yes," said Gardius. "He obeyed you."

"And you refused to drop but flew back like an anthrocore?"

"I flew back."

"Drop that knife!" said Arman. Gardius slowly lowered his head, slumped

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his shoulders into a crouch. *"Quick!"* barked Arman. "Or I'll burn your hand off!"

Gardius dropped the knife.

"I know all about you," said Arman. "You hoped to take me to Maxus—alive. For torture."

Gardius said nothing.

"Last night," said Arman, "I allowed my temper to interfere with my intellect. A man is a valuable property. Too valuable to drop in a swamp. A man like you will sell for two thousand milrays at Alambar. So—" He raised his voice. *"Kyle!"*

There was a scrape of feet along the catwalk grating. A squat man in white overalls shoved his face into the room. He had a brown face seamed with wrinkles, eyes like prunes. He asked, "What'll you have?"

"Spray this man."

The squat man, without change of expression, turned to a cabinet, came back with a hypospray. He applied it to Gardius' neck. There was the sharp hiss of the air-driven drug.

Arman said, "In a minute you'll be asleep and you'll awake in Alambar. A more vindictive man than I might punish you—but the price of your body will be useful. Every ana is useful."

Gardius felt a slow dizzy tide rising over his head. His knees buckled, his arms hung loosely. He saw the faintly smiling Arman gesture to the simian little man, who came forward to catch him. As his eyes glazed he saw a woman climbing the ladder into the cabin. Mist flooded his vision. It might have been Mardien.

CHAPTER X

The Slave Distribute

THERE was a feel of fingers on his face, a buzzing at his ears, a vibration at his scalp.

He opened his eyes. An old man with a power-shaver was trimming his hair. Gardius jerked to a sitting position. He was in a large white-tiled room, on a slab of gray slate which felt cold and clammy below him. He was naked.

A damp sensation and the sight of a hose on the floor informed him that he had been washed. Around him on other slabs lay about fifty other men and women, all naked, all glistening damply. Two other attendants were working with power-cutters.

There was constraint at his wrist. He looked down. He was handcuffed. The attendant came forward with a simple key, removed the cuffs. "Sometimes newcomers are nervous—wild, you know—when they wake up," he said, almost apologetically.

Gardius relaxed back on the slab. "I suppose I'm in Alambar?"

"Correct," said the attendant.

"At the Distribute."

"Correct."

Gardius looked woodenly around the room. "And these others were in the same load with me?"

The attendant nodded. "Six hundred at a crack. Arman's load."

"How long have I been here?"

"You were discharged this morning."

Gardius rose to his feet, staggered a trifle. His arms and legs were pale. His tissues seemed flabby, wasted. The attendant said, "A day or two of good food will fill you out as good as new."

"Where are my clothes," muttered Gardius. "I've got to get out of here." Then angrily, "Where are my clothes?"

The attendant sniffed. "Be quiet, man—quiet. Loud talk never helps. You're stamped with a penal circuit now and they'll singe your hide for any excuse the first few weeks. They like you to struggle and roar. It's the only fun they have."

Gardius muttered, "I want to see the Lord High Patroller."

"In good time, in good time. Tell one of the Overmen. I'm just a slave like yourself."

Gardius sank back to the slab. Time passed. A few others moved fitfully, sat up. Gardius looked from face to face. If the Otros were mad there would be

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tantrums, fits of hysteria. But they maintained perfect order and gravity.

"They were men and women past the first glow of youth. The men were neither muscular nor heavy; the women were none of them shapely or beautiful. These men and women would be assigned neither to labor nor to bedchambers. They might well be trained for technical occupations.

A bell sounded, a door opened, a guard in a black uniform entered the room. He carried a light limber whisk, which he swung jauntily. Gardius, meeting his eyes, felt anger bristling up inside him.

The guard said, "Titus, this is a well-behaved crew. Not a yell from the lot. Well, those of you who are alive, jump up now. Form a line and follow me. You will pass the commissary and each of you will take one suit of underwear, one smock, one pair of sandles—no more, no less. Quickly now, let's be lively and start off on the right foot." He cut the air with his whisk.

They were herded past a counter, where they received clothes, past a desk where a badge was hung around their necks. Then the men were diverted through one door, the women through another.

Gardius found himself in a long well-lighted hall, faced with plate glass. It was a familiar room—like the room in which he had first seen Mardien. About fifty other men occupied the hall, some walking with heads morosely bent, others staring blankly at the glass. A few talked in somber undertones. A boy was sniffing mournfully.

At the end of the hall stood a hulking red-haired slave in a black and green harness—an orderly who evidently enjoyed his position. Gardius walked up to him, met an eye as cold and blank as a frog's.

Gardius said, "How do I get to use a telephone?"

"You don't. Your telephoning days are over."

"I want to call the Lord High Patroller. He's a friend of mine."

The orderly enjoyed the remark. "And I'm the Patriarch's uncle."

Gardius said in a measured voice, "Call whoever is in charge."

"I'm in charge."

"Then if there's any delay, the responsibility is yours."

The guard blinked. After all, stranger things had happened. "Just a minute."

He went to the door, called through a screen, and a minute later the Overman corporal appeared outside. The orderly jerked his thumb at Gardius. "This man says he's a friend of the Lord High Patroller's. He wants to telephone him."

The corporal raised black eyebrows, smiled indulgently. "Some of them claim to be the Messiah himself."

Gardius said patiently, "I want to talk with the Lord High Patroller over the telephone or a telescreen. I tell you I've been working for him. I'm here by mistake. It'll go hard with you if you cross him."

The smile vanished from the spare sardonic face. He said, "Come along, then. We'll see. You'll regret it if you're making trouble."

He took Gardius to a central office, where Gardius told his tale to a lieutenant in a tight black-and-gold uniform. The lieutenant gestured to a telescreen. "There it is. Use it. Titus knows, I stand aside where the Lord High Patroller walks."

Gardius looked at the dial, punched the button which read "Central Office." A seven-pointed star appeared on the screen, a voice said, "Connection."

"The Lord High Patroller," said Gardius.

A SCOWLING visage appeared, a face with heavy black eyebrows, a coarse mop of hair, a hooked beak of a nose. "Well?"

Gardius said, "I want to talk to the Lord High Patroller."

"Who are you?" His eyes raked Gardius' face and costume. "You're a slave. Where is your respect?"

"I am Jaime Gardius. Tell the Lord High Patroller Jaime Gardius would speak with him."

Growling, the man turned away, spoke into a mesh, spoke again. He

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turned back. "He says he doesn't know you."

Behind Gardius the lieutenant and the corporal moved restively. Gardius said desperately, "Tell him I saw him about Arman—a month or so ago. He sent me out after Arman."

The man turned once more, spoke into the mesh, nodded, spoke again. His face vanished. Gardius found himself looking into the narrow face of the Lord High Patroller.

"Ah, Gardius," said the Lord High Patroller—and laughed a thin merry delicate laugh. Gardius stood grimly silent, blushing. The Lord High Patroller at last said, "This is ridiculous and it's sad. I send you out to bring me Arman and instead he sells you to the Distribute for a slave. Is that not a farce?"

"A farce indeed," agreed Gardius. "However—if you'll get me loose from this pen—I'll be delighted to try again."

The Lord High Patroller shook his head. "Ah, my dear fellow, I'm afraid I am powerless. You are out of my hands now. The Patriarch would be indignant if I meddled with the labor supply. I could treat with you when you held a visitor's permit. Then you were inviolate.

"I required that you bring me Arman. Instead he brings me you. I bear you no ill will but I bear you no gratitude either. No, Gardius, you are more valuable to Maxus as a millhand than as a kidnaper. Serve well, behave well and let me hear no more from you."

The screen died.

Gardius stared at it, his mouth still full of words. Behind him the lieutenant said in a practical voice, "Return him to the hall."

Gardius became accustomed to the constant appraisal from the hall. Narrow-eyed personnel foremen estimated his resistance, strength, flexibility. Lords seeking trim lackeys considered his poise and carriage. The ladies of the great colonnaded townhouses, in search of footmen and attendants, studied his physique, his features.

A bony-nosed thin-lipped face caught his eye. It frowned in puzzlement as it looked—then turned excitedly toward a companion, pointed. Recognition came to Gardius. "Lord Spangle," he muttered to himself. "I'm in for it."

The auction came the same afternoon. One by one the occupants of the hall were ordered out into the arena. Gardius' turn came almost at once. He stood looking stonily over the crowd.

The auctioneer whispered, "Look pleasant, lad, there's ladies here. If you don't get a lady it's the mines or the heavy metals—that's where they need husky men like you. So look pleasant and smile on the women bidders and maybe you'll win yourself a soft bed."

He raised his voice. "A man from Exar, full-muscled and handsome. See that fine chest, observe the straight neck, the strong feet. A valuable man in any capacity, so, ladies and gentlemen, let me hear your bids."

"Eight hundred milrays."

"Eight hundred and fifty" . . . "nine hundred and fifty . . ." These were emotionless careful voices of men from the industrial plants.

"One thousand milrays," said a hoarse voice. It had a gleeful overtone. Gardius recognized it—Lord Spangle's. Against his will Gardius looked around the room, met Spangle's eyes. Spangle was whispering behind his hand into the ear of a man in a gorgeous yellow-and-green doublet, whom Gardius recognized as Lord Jonas.

A woman said doubtfully, "One thousand one hundred."

"One thousand one hundred and fifty," said one of the foremen. The others were silent, relaxing back in their seats.

"One thousand two hundred," said Spangle quickly, easily.

The auctioneer said, "Come, ladies, gentlemen, more action. Speak up, speak up! This is a valuable man. He is intelligent, educated at Exar Technical College. He is a qualified engineer, astute and reliable. Now speak up, speak up—who'll say one thousand five hundred?"

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One of the foremen stirred but a big bony woman raised a finger. "One thousand three hundred." He subsided in his seat.

Spangle said silkily, "One thousand four hundred."

The woman said, "One thousand four hundred and fifty," in a determined voice.

Jonas laughed at one of Spangle's comments and said, "One thousand five hundred."

"One thousand six hundred," said Spangle, looking reproachfully at Jonas.

The bony woman sniffed, looked away.

"One thousand six hundred? One thousand six hundred?" barked the auctioneer. "Do I hear one thousand seven hundred?"

"One thousand seven hundred," said a sharp voice to the side.

"One thousand eight hundred," said a woman from the rear.

"One thousand nine hundred," said Spangle sourly.

"Two thousand," said the woman.

SPANGLE muttered uncomfortably to Jonas, then shrugged. "Two thousand one hundred."

"Two thousand two hundred," from the woman.

"Two thousand two hundred bid," cried the auctioneer. "A fine valuable man, a good worker, I'll warrant. Two thousand three hundred? Where's two thousand three hundred?"

Silence. Spangle half-opened his mouth to speak, closed it again, eyeing the stony-faced Gardius with a reptilian vindictiveness.

"Sold then!" cried the auctioneer. "Sold to the lady for two thousand two hundred milrays." He turned to Gardius. "Step down, go over to the registration desk."

Gardius moved wordlessly across the floor, toward the woman by the table. He looked at her, his step faltered. "Mardien!"

She smiled and he saw her eyes were moist.

"It was the least I could do for you, Jaime."

CHAPTER XI

The Otros' Secret

OUT under the gray skies of late afternoon, out onto the slip-strip, past the dark and sweaty black-brick warehouses. They traversed a tunnel and fog swept damply across their cheeks as they came out into the light again. They passed the elegant town-houses, rode through another dank tunnel and out into the busy heart of Alambar.

Gardius said to Mardien, stiffly, for he had never learned conversational grace, "I suppose I must thank you." He paused uncomfortably.

She turned her head. "Well?"

He laughed. "Thank you. Although I don't understand why you—rescued me. A couple weeks ago you were glad to have me killed. You shot at me yourself."

"That was two—or rather, three weeks ago. I've done a lot of thinking since then. And I think, in those three weeks, I've left my youth behind."

Gardius said, "There's a tavern. Let's sit down."

It was a flat-faced building of glazed brick with a square wooden door painted rusty-red. Inside it was warm and quiet. Light seeped through windows of stained glass, fell pleasantly over the tables where they sat.

Crackers and salted fish were set before them and presently a great globular bottle of warm wine, which shone at once watery green and pink in the mugs. Looking across the table at Mardien Gardius completely gave himself to relaxation. She reached, took his hand in both of hers. "Jaime—I'm confused."

"You must have reached some conclusion—or you would not have come for me."

She chewed her lip doubtfully. "I don't know. There are so many uncertainties— so many opinions on right and wrong."

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"Inwardly you're certain. The certainty is just making itself known to you."

She asked with a rueful half-smile, "How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're here with me. Instead of with your—instead of Arman."

The last was so evidently bitter that she drew her hand back. Then she said, "Jaime—I believe you really are jealous. I accused you of it once but I didn't believe it. Are you really?"

"No. I would be presuming."

"But you are—aren't you?"

"No. My life has no place in it for—for women."

"You mean a woman like me, don't you?"

"I suppose so."

"Jaime, I am not, I never was, I never wanted to be anything to Arman except a follower, an Armanite." She looked away, blushed a trifle. "If you overlook a perfectly normal enthusiasm and hero worship. He might have had me if he had been less devious.

"If he had *taken* me—offhandedly—like a utensil or a piece of clothing I would have given myself gladly—proud to be serving a god. But he tried to woo me as a human being on my own level and I was troubled. I put him off. I've found something out, Jaime. Arman is weak."

Gardius drank wine, oddly comforted. "He needs killing."

Mardien said abstractedly, "His body compels respect. He is quick to use this respect. He is crafty with his tongue—but he has no fundamental fiber, Jaime. When he and you were fighting, you were beaten.

"You were nearly dead. I could see it. You refused to stop. It frightened Arman—and he gave up. When he fell down he lay there passively. It's a queer perversity which—disgusts me, Jaime."

"Where is he now?"

She looked at him soberly. "Jaime, when I helped you I made no conditions. I'd like to make one now."

"What is it?"

"That you do nothing without talking it over with me."

SHE was leaning across the table, holding his hand in both of hers again. He covered hers with his other one, squeezed. She responded, their eyes met. Gardius sighed. "I was not meant for a quiet life, Mardien."

"Nor I, Jaime. We'll be happy together."

He said in a low voice, "I'll never rest while there are slaves and slavers. I've been too close to it."

"Nor I, Jaime." She leaned back in her seat, slumped with her shoulders and hips on a slant, legs thrust out. "I thought that Arman promised an end to the bad things. But Jaime, I'm doubtful now. Arman might be misguided."

Gardius snorted. "Misguided—it's a weak word for a murderer, a pimp, a slaver, a witch-doctor."

She shuddered. "I know, Jaime. I hate even to think it. Because now six hundred of my people have been led from their homes and sold into slavery."

"But *why?*" cried Gardius. "*Why?* I see no logic in it. Are you Otros truly crazy?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. People call us crazy because we're individualistic."

"You're a strange people, I'll agree."

"Yes, we are—but not in the way you think. Our outward strangeness—our clothes, houses, mannerisms—they're just a reflection of our inner strangeness and that is our racial secret."

Gardius wordlessly drank wine.

"Our victory over death."

Gardius watched her quietly.

She said, "Jaime, I love you. I link my life to yours. Once before I offered to make you one of us. I loved you then but I would not admit it even to myself. It popped out and surprised me."

"I can't become an Otro without help?"

"Oh no. In the beginning there was only one—Sagel Domino. The difference was in his brain. He was strongly telepathic. He could read minds easily. He thought, 'Why should I die? If just before I die, I can achieve a rapport, an identity of consciousness with someone else, this body of mine will go but my

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consciousness will jump the gap, survive and I will live forever.'

"He made contact with his best friend, established a rapport. And then they found that the rapport had stimulated the friend's brain, that the friend was an Otro also. He was not so strongly telepathic but he could create the rapport. He made Otros of some of his friends, and their wives, and so did Sagel Domino.

"And now we are several millions, some of us telepathic, some not. But none of us fear death. When we are in danger we build a rapport with someone who loves us and our consciousness leaps the gap, like a man stepping from a sinking boat into a sound one."

Gardius grimaced. "There seems to be little privacy among you."

She shook her head vehemently. Her silky blond hair flew fanwise.

"But there *is!* The new soul makes no demands. There is no conflict of wills. The old consciousness is given continual awareness without a break. The old memories—since they are not firmly channeled into the ganglia—are presently lost and there is only the sense of continuity.

"For the person dying it's like putting down one interesting book and taking up another. And for the living person—since we only make rapport with those we love—we are glad to help, glad to sustain the old personality."

HE looked at her curiously. "And how many people are in you?"

She winced. "Jaime—you do not understand! I am I. I am *me!* Even if forty people had bridged death into me I would still be myself. Indeed, as you're aware, we overcompensate in the idea of singularity. We're conscious of the need for individualism, of the constant reassurance of individualism. Perhaps we carry it to an extreme.

"Other races achieve a melancholy peace by making themselves as alike as possible, identifying themselves outwardly with the race. Our identification is inner. The outer symbols of persistence are unnecessary. There are no tombs on the Alam Highlands, no hoarding of wealth.

"My mother loved her garden. She had many flowers. She died and yet lived in me. I have no yearning whatever for flowers or plants. I worry about people and the future and social evils. So you see the link is only one of awareness. It's as if you were flying over the countryside and picked up a passenger who was enjoying the ride with you but who presently became part of the air-car."

"What did you feel when your mother's soul came to you?"

"Only a great joy at being of service," said Mardien earnestly. "As if I had saved her from drowning. I felt her presence for a few weeks as if she were in the room with me—it was very pleasant. Then gradually she melted completely into me."

"And Arman," asked Gardius, "is he an Otro? Will he live after his death?"

She blushed, nodded shamefacedly. "His mother was an Otro. One of the few Otros the Overmen have ever enslaved. Usually we Otros will kill ourselves and so escape."

"But who is Arman in rapport with? *You?*"

She blushed even pinker. "I blocked it out a week ago. I do not know how else he is protected."

"Tell me," said Gardius, "why did six hundred Otros come to Maxus as slaves?"

Mardien was silent a moment. Then she said, "If Arman did nothing else he has aroused us to a sense of responsibility. For hundreds of years we have been selfish, insular, jealous of our secret." She met Gardius' eyes.

"The six hundred, Jaime, they are our most highly developed telepaths. They are our spies. They will edge themselves into the critical industries, and telepathize the guarded techniques back to Fell."

"And then?"

Mardien nodded with a sad smile. "And then—we'd have two slave states. I see it now. There are others who will also. But—can we stop now? The cru-

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sade is in motion. Six hundred of us are here on Maxus. How can we sacrifice them—for nothing?"

Gardius said woodenly, "Your emphasis is wrong."

"How do you mean?" she asked, startled.

"You worry about six hundred Otros. Think of hundreds and hundreds of millions of slaves who are already on Maxus."

Her gaze wavered, turned down at the table. "I have nothing to say. Arman is leader. As soon as the holds in his ship are full he's going back for another load."

Gardius leaned forward. "But there must be some center of authority among the Otros."

"Oh yes—the Elders, the township councils. They have no particular authority. Arman has organized a private crusade. The Armanites are the active element."

Gardius drummed the table with his fingers. "There's something evading me—something, somewhere. I wonder if your people realize how long they'll have to remain on Maxus, how well the Overmen guard their secrets, how many of them will be killed."

"That means nothing," she reminded him.

"If all the slaves were Otros," said Gardius, "if none of the slaves feared death—there would no longer be a slave state." He looked at Mardien. "Did you hear me? If your six hundred Otros indoctrinated the other slaves there would no longer be any discipline. As a consequence the system would collapse."

Mardien said, "If only twenty percent of the new Otros were telepathic . . ."

"Organization," said Gardius. "There would be the organization."

"We've got to get back to Fell—to the telepaths who can connect to the six hundred."

"Two things," said Gardius. "First Arman. He's an obstacle. He's got to be removed. And then—my brother and sister."

CHAPTER XII

Played for Fools

THE black ship hulked quietly on the field, surrounded by active motes. Men swabbed out the tubes, crawled over the skin, wiping meteor dust from the windows. From the long black warehouse at one side of the field a ginpole held out an endless belt, which carried a slow-moving line of boxes to a hatch in the side of the ship. Drays loaded with heavier crates pulled up on a gravinul platform under the cargo hatch and the crates were tossed up and stowed.

A ragged cloud-wrack hung over Alambar and a cold wind blew litter along the field. Arman's cloak flapped at his legs as he approached the ship. Inside it was warmer. He passed down the corridor, climbed the ladder to the control dome, stood looking across the field toward the olive-green roof of the Patriarch's palace, which rose hugely in the distance.

He reached up his hands, felt the swelling muscles of his chest, breathed deeply. Peace, relaxation—no worries, no decisions to make. The slaves were safely out of his hands, the cargo was loading. Three weeks of nothing to do lay ahead.

He thought of Mardien. With nothing serious on his mind it was time to consider his pleasures. She had put him off—but no, that couldn't be. He was Arman. She should be proud to receive him. If she had put him off she had put him off long enough.

He looked toward the door to her cabin. Sounds of movement came from within. Blood pounding in his ears, he strode to the dooor, knocked.

"Yes?" came the answer from within. Her voice was breathless, nervous. Ah, she knew his desires. He tried the door. It was locked.

"Mardien," said Arman huskily. "Open the door."

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"No, Arman."

"Open! I want you, Mardien. I will take you as a god should—" He heard her rise to her feet. He rattled the door handle. "Let me in or I'll burn open the door."

"Very well," said Mardien in a strange voice.

The door opened. Arman walked into the room. A man stood there with his back to the light.

Furiously Arman turned to Mardien. "Jade—tramp—" He peered at the man who had advanced a step. Arman blinked, his shoulders sagged. His hand dropped to the pouch at his belt. Gardius fired first.

* * * * *

"Murder," said the police patroller, looking up from the corpse to Gardius.

"Self-defense," said Mardien. "It was. I saw it."

Gardius said, "This dead man is Arman."

"I realize that," said the patroller. "What is your status?"

"Slave," said Gardius dryly.

"Why no, Gardius—" protested Mardien.

The patroller sprang to his feet. "This is a terrible crime!"

"Let us visit the Lord High Patroller," suggested Gardius, "and discover his opinion."

"The Lord High Patroller? It's not necessary to bother him with things like this."

"He'll want to know about Arman. He'll be interested."

The Lord High Patroller was pacing the floor when they finally gained admittance to his chamber. He wore a long cloak of watered black silk with a blue sheen where the light glanced off it and it rustled rhythmically to his steps. His face was flushed, excited. He seemed absorbed with some inner problem and took small notice of his visitors.

Mardien and Gardius stood close together with the patroller a pace distant in a subtle attitude of accusation.

The Lord High Patroller stopped short, faced the three. His eyebrows shot up at the sight of Gardius. He murmured, "Gardius? I am astonished."

"He's committed murder, your Lordship," said the patroller.

"Murder now? That's very serious. Who? When? Where? How?"

"The slaver Arman, sir. Just an hour or so ago with an ion gun."

"Hah!" The Lord High Patroller snapped his fingers. "Now that's interesting. Murder, you say?"

"Yes, sir. In the control dome of Arman's own ship."

"Sordid, sordid!" The Lord High Patroller shook his head, then waved his hand. "You can go. Make arrangements for the body."

The patroller departed; the Lord High Patroller flung himself back into a seat. "My dear Gardius, I fear your zeal has brought you trouble."

"I don't understand you."

The Lord High Patroller said with hands expressively turned outward. "It's surely clear! Murder is a serious crime here on Maxus. Especially murder of an Overman by a slave. You are a slave, are you not? You were a week ago if you informed me correctly."

"Regardless of my condition Arman was not an Overman."

"He visited Maxus on permit. Thus he is accorded Overman privileges. This has to be—we make no exceptions, otherwise our commerce with foreign planets would dwindle to nothing."

MARDIEN said, "It was self-defense, your lordship."

"No excuse," declared the Lord High Patroller. "No excuse whatever. A slave may not value his life so highly. You may think me legalistic but these are definitions on which we base our civilization."

"But," Gardius pointed out indignantly, "you employed me to kill Arman in the first place."

"The circumstances were different. An event which takes place on the planet Fell is one I can applaud or disapprove on a personal basis. Here, on Maxus I must enforce the law."

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Mardien said desperately, "You don't know the circumstances, Lord!-I bought Gardius from the Distribute. He was in my cabin. Arman demanded to be let in. I told him to keep out and he threatened to burn the door in. He—he planned to force himself on me. I opened the door and when he saw Jaime, he quickly drew his gun to shoot. But Jaime shot first—in my defense and his own. He was acting as my guard, as my protector."

THE Lord High Patroller stroked his chin doubtfully. "You would submit to hypnotic examination on that testimony?"

"Yes indeed. It's the truth."

The Lord High Patroller sighed. "Very well. On such a questionable imbroglio we won't press the charges. There were no other witnesses, I presume?"

"No."

"Very well then." He drew himself up to his desk. "But the Patriarch insists on stern enforcements. If he hears about this—this killing, I fear the worst. If I were you I would leave the planet as soon as possible."

Gardius looked at him through suddenly narrow eyes. The accusations, the strict reading of the law—were these side-issues to evade other commitments? It would, he thought, be dangerous to press too hard.

The Lord High Patroller clearly was in a restive mood.

"My Lord," said Gardius gently, "in any event, regardless of the method, motive, time and place, I fulfilled my—our objective. I killed Arman. Now will you return me my brother and sister as you promised?"

The Lord High Patroller looked up slowly. "My dear Gardius—do I hear you rightly? Just now, on the unsupported word of this girl, I take the responsibility of releasing you—and you make demands of me! You are amazingly bold!"

Mardien tugged Gardius' arm. "Come, Jaime."

"Do I understand then," asked Gardius, "that you will not return me my brother and sister?"

The Lord High Patroller's brows dropped into a straight line. "Naturally not. They are integrated happily into their new lives. Your brother operates a power tool. Your sister occupies—an interesting position elsewhere. You are presumptuous. The Patriarch would have my head. Now leave before I reconsider my generosity!"

"Come, Jaime," whispered Mardien. "Come."

Reluctantly Gardius turned away. The Lord High Patroller's voice came after him. "You understand, Arman's ship is impounded, together with its cargo. In the presumable absence of heirs and recognizing Arman's debt to the Patriarch, whose private yacht he stole, the state will undoubtedly take title to the ship. So it will be wise to remove your personal effects immediately."

Mardien and Gardius stood in the street, the Guchman Arch looming overhead.

"Failure again," said Gardius, clenching and unclenching his fists. "Played for fools and turned away."

MARDIEN pulled his arm, urged him to walk—feeling that as long as Gardius was moving he would do nothing rash.

"Failure! My poor little sister—so trusting and innocent . . ."

"Jaime—don't brood. It won't help. And we're lucky to be alive."

Gardius stopped dead in his tracks, turned, looked back at the Guchman Arch, up towards the Lord High Patroller's suite.

"There's the man I should have killed. If he and his kind did not exist—there would be no Armans."

"Nonsense," said Mardien. "There have always been bad men—there always will. Now come, Jaime, dear—before you get in more trouble. We'll buy ourselves passage back to Fell on one of the cargo ships."

Gardius muttered, "It's not over yet. And the next time I stand before him—the next time . . ."

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CHAPTER XIII

Revolt on Maxus

THE Reverend Patriarch of Maxus and his Lord High Patroller were both as thin as stick-insects. Their noses cut down from pale foreheads, past hollow eye-sockets, like blades of bone. The Patriarch was taller by a head and his hair was gray. The Lord High Patroller's hair, shiny black, was looped, swirled, pasted according to the Alambar mode.

The Patriarch's expression was mercurial, wide-eyed, suspicious. The Lord High Patroller affected a heavy-lidded stare. The Patriarch was the more hard-handed and unresponsive, the Lord High Patroller the more subtle. By a coincidence today they both wore heavy scarlet robes.

The Patriarch paced the cerise rug. The Lord High Patroller sat quietly in a soft chair upholstered in strips of human skin dyed yellow and black. The Patriarch rubbed his hands together, fingers flashing at his pale wrists.

"Harmless or not—religious cult or not—it represents organization. Organization among the slaves we cannot permit."

The Lord High Patroller made a careless grimace. "It affords a sop, an opiate. It fulfills a need."

"Need?"

"Certainly. Consider the rapidity in which this movement has permeated the slaves—here, there, everywhere. If it did not satisfy a longing it would not have met such rapid acceptance."

"It represents organization," stated the Patriarch obstinately.

"I cannot agree. It is amorphous, there is no centrality. It is a mere fad, a popular cult. I say, let them revel in it, let them exhaust their nervous energies in ritual. We will have fewer disciplinary problems and consequently higher productivity. Already I notice a more widespread docility, especially among the least amenable ratings."

"*Pah!* Slaves are docile only when there is power in the penal circuits." He swooped to a seat, drank from his cup of hot brew. "And how do you know what codes and secret symbols are present in these rituals?"

The Lord High Patroller fingered the ruby dangling from his ear. "I have spies and informers who tell me—"

"So," the Patriarch burst out triumphantly, "you feel concern you do not admit! Beware, Lesman, do not attempt subterfuge!"

"Of course not, Magnificat. I merely demonstrate my determination to overlook no conceivable source of disquiet, no minor node of unrest."

"See that you continue to do so." The Patriarch resumed his pacing. "There is yet a question of—"

A servant in a red-white-and-gray tunic entered the room, coughed timidly. The Lord High Patroller spoke angrily. "What do you mean by this intrusion? Can't you see we are in discussion?"

The servant bent his head. "Excuse me, Lord, there is a man who insists on an immediate audience."

"Immediate audience! At this time in the morning? Who is it?"

"His name is Jaime Gardius. He says he has just arrived from the planet Fell and he insists on the urgency of his business. I warned him that you were in consultation but he impressed me with the importance of his business. He seemed confident that you would see him."

The Patriarch said petulantly, "Who is this man Gardius?"

The Lord High Patroller stood a moment without reply, staring at the door.

"Who is he, I say?"

"Remember Arman?" the Lord High Patroller asked in an absent tone of voice.

"Don't mention that name."

"Gardius killed him. A rather sordid murder in Arman's ship. He was released on evidence of self-defense."

"What does he want now?"

"I have no idea. He's here from Fell—that's where the Otros come from. It's the Otros, if you'll remember, who

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seem to have promulgated this new cult."

The Patriarch nodded to the servant. "Search him well for weapons, then show him in. Double the guards at the door."

GARDIUS entered. He nodded to the Lord High Patroller, saluted the Patriarch. He wore a handsome cloak of dark blue cloth embroidered with a pattern of vines and leaves. He carried himself with an assurance and a lack of respect which irritated the Lord High Patroller.

"Well, Gardius? I thought I had seen the last of you."

"Your time has come."

The two men in the scarlet robes gaped at him. "What do you mean?"

"There are four hundred million slaves on this planet. You Overmen number forty million. The slaves surround you, press on you like water around fish."

The Patriarch opened and closed his mouth wordlessly. The Lord High Patroller advanced slowly, until he stared eye to eye with Gardius. He said, "You hardly present us with a novel discovery."

"What does he want?" croaked the Patriarch. "If he is an assassin—"

Gardius turned his eyes to the Patriarch, smiled faintly. "You live in an aura of fear. Would you not prefer a happy world, without the abyss between master and slave, without the penal circuits, without the lash, without the degradation on both hands? Would you not prefer a world of people on equal terms cooperating to the benefit of all?"

The Lord High Patroller said, "It is hardly a matter of preference. Such is the society we live in. Only a cataclysm could change it."

"Then there will be such a cataclysm."

The Lord High Patroller said, narrow-eyed, "Are you threatening us?"

"Yes," said Gardius. "I am."

There was a pause.

"And when will this cataclysm occur?"

"At this very moment."

The Patriarch had sidled back to the mustard-colored wall-hanging, put his hand behind him. "Wait!" called Gardius. "It is to your advantage to wait."

The guard, summoned by the Patriarch's signal, entered. "Take him out," the Patriarch gasped throatily. "Kill him."

The Lord High Patroller held up a hand. "Wait, Magnificat, wait, if you will. Perhaps this man has something to tell us."

Gardius seemed to be listening to the air. He turned his head suddenly, said, "I have, indeed. I will inform you that about a million Overmen died in the last thirty seconds."

"What?"

"Is there a window near, overlooking the street?"

The Lord High Patroller turned, darted a calculating glance at the Patriarch, who stood rigid, eyes staring dark and large from his pale face. The Lord High Patroller said decisively, "This way."

He went with swift strides through the door, into the dark barrel-vaulted hall, swept aside the velours drapes at a high window, peered out and down, saw swarming confusion, tangles of broken mechanism, clotted dead bodies.

The Lord High Patroller's shoulders hunched forward. His hands gripped at the drapes. The Patriarch said hoarsely, "What is it? Let me see." He pushed to the window, bent his head. *"Oh!"*

Gardius said, "We would have preferred a less bloody demonstration—but here is a spectacle the Overmen understand. In Alambar, in Crevecoar, in Beloat, in Murabas—in every city on Maxus—every vehicle carrying Overmen and guided by a slave is a wreck, crashed. The streets are filled with wrecks."

The Lord High Patroller turned his head and his eyes blazed. "There will be terrible retribution for this crime. There will be a great flowing of blood, a laying bare of white Orth bones."

Gardius shook his head. "You don't understand our power. We encompass

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you, we hold you like a fist around a handful of grapes. Now the fist has nerves, discipline. When the order comes to squeeze, it grips and another million Overmen are dead."

The Lord High Patroller raised his hands to his hair. Conditioned reflex made him halt short of disturbing the pasted locks. He put his hands down.

Gardius said, "There must be an understanding—now, before the hour is out. If not, when this hour is up, there will be no Overmen left on the planet. The cataclysm you mentioned has come. Well, what is your word?"

The Lord High Patroller looked to the Patriarch. The Patriarch said in a husky whisper, "He is a madman."

Gardius laughed. "You are unconcerned. Then listen—but no, you cannot hear." He tilted his head as if he were hearing a faint but very significant sound. He looked up.

"The Glauris Dyke has been breached. It is night on Glauris Bottom. The Overmen are sleeping in the pleasure-cabins, in the great inns, on the barges along the Yellowpetal. It is the night of the summer solstice, the night of the Lords' Convocation." He paused.

"The Pheresan Sea is now flowing a hundred feet deep over Glauris Bottom and another million Overmen are dead, including twenty thousand of the lords."

The Lord High Patroller went to the wall, spoke into a telephone. "Get me the Rolite Nauton Hotel—quick. . . . It doesn't answer? Get the Glauris Maintenance Station—quick! . . . Yes, yes, now listen, look over the Bottom. What do you see? . . . Don't *scream!*" The Lord High Patroller's voice was itself a scream. "*Water?*"

He blindly returned the telephone to the wall, turned to the Patriarch. "We are being bled to death, Magnificat—bled white—the first men of the galaxy!"

"Well, what is your word?" came the voice of Gardius.

"We have no word."

"Then there will be more death."

They stared at him. He seemed taller, he loomed, his face was commanding. They were shrunken, dry, weak as mummies in their scarlet robes.

"What else can you do?"

"We can make rubble of this palace and all Alambar for miles around. And all life will be crushed. You will die, Patroller, and you will die, Patriarch."

"And *you* will die," the Lord High Patroller pointed out. There was no more arrogance or anger in his voice. Now he was bargaining, pushing for advantage, supple as an eel.

GARDIUS smiled. "Die? I have no fear of dying. Thousands and thousands of slaves have just died killing Overmen. Dying is nothing, it is immaterial. We are all Otros now."

"You see, you *see*," bawled the Patriarch. "I knew it should have been stopped."

"What do you want us to do?" inquired the Lord High Patroller.

"The Patriarch must go to the phone, order all uniformed guards, militia and patrollers to their barracks. They must leave their weapons at the door. The central panel at the Penal Control must be vacated. Then he must call for planetary broadcast connection and announce that there are no longer slaves and Overmen on Maxus—that all are free men—that a representative government will be formed."

"No!" moaned the Patriarch.

Gardius waited in silence. The Lord

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED NOVEL

THE CONTINENT MAKERS

By L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

A RIOTOUS FANTASY OF TIME TO COME!

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High Patroller asked, "How will you destroy the palace?"

"We will blast the power stations—the three of them, Patroller—that hold up the Portal Fort. The power goes dead in the gravinuls, the fort falls—a quarter-million tons from ten miles up. It will drop like the crack of doom. Alambar will be a smashed pot. The palace will be a shard."

The Patriarch wabbled, supported himself on the velours hangings. The Lord High Patroller turned to him, full of vital authority. "He wins. Our day is over. Obey him."

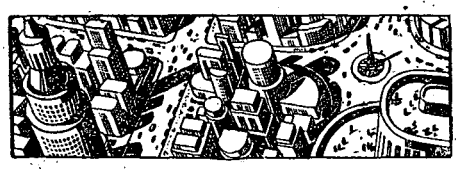
The shadow of old habits struggled across the Patriarch's face. His hands clawed at the velours drapes and he tried to pull his long shape erect and menacing. "Obey him!" said the Lord High Patroller harshly.

"No," cried the Patriarch. "I cannot—I will not. It is unthinkable."

The Lord High Patroller brought out his small gun, burned the Patriarch up and down. The tall body crackled like jackstraws in a flame.

"I will make that announcement," said the Lord High Patroller. He went to the phone on the wall.

"There are no more slaves on Maxus. . . ."



Wonder Oddities

WOVEN rope sandals, of all things, are currently held to be the oldest items used by man in prehistoric America. Found under lava in an Oregon cavern, their age—some 9,000 years, is proved by measurement via the new radiocarbon atomic calendar.

OFFERING continued puzzles to British archeologists is the so-called Sutton Hoo hip bone, found surrounded by pagan treasure in a Viking type vessel under a Suffolk riverbank. Latest reports have it not a bone at all but simulated for burial purposes in 650 A.D.

NO longer is the jolly fat man considered a symbol of easy-going health and prosperity. Instead, a recent issue of the AMA Journal suggests that doctors consider him a sick man on the road to arteriosclerosis, in need of careful dietary supervision.

DEVELOPED recently by General Electric Company engineers at Schenectady, New York, is the first instrument capable of detecting and counting all three types of uranium radiation—alpha, beta and gamma. It is called the *universal scintillation counter.*

ELECTRICAL attraction is currently held to be the primal step in the attack of disease-making viruses on body cells, according to Professor Theodore T. Puck of the University of Colorado. After being attracted to a cell by electricity, viruses then become a part of the cell itself.

ROBOTS are with us already, according to Army Ballistics Research Scientist Herbert K. Weiss, who states that automatic pilots for planes, mechanical computers and "controlled" machine tools can already plan and act for themselves.

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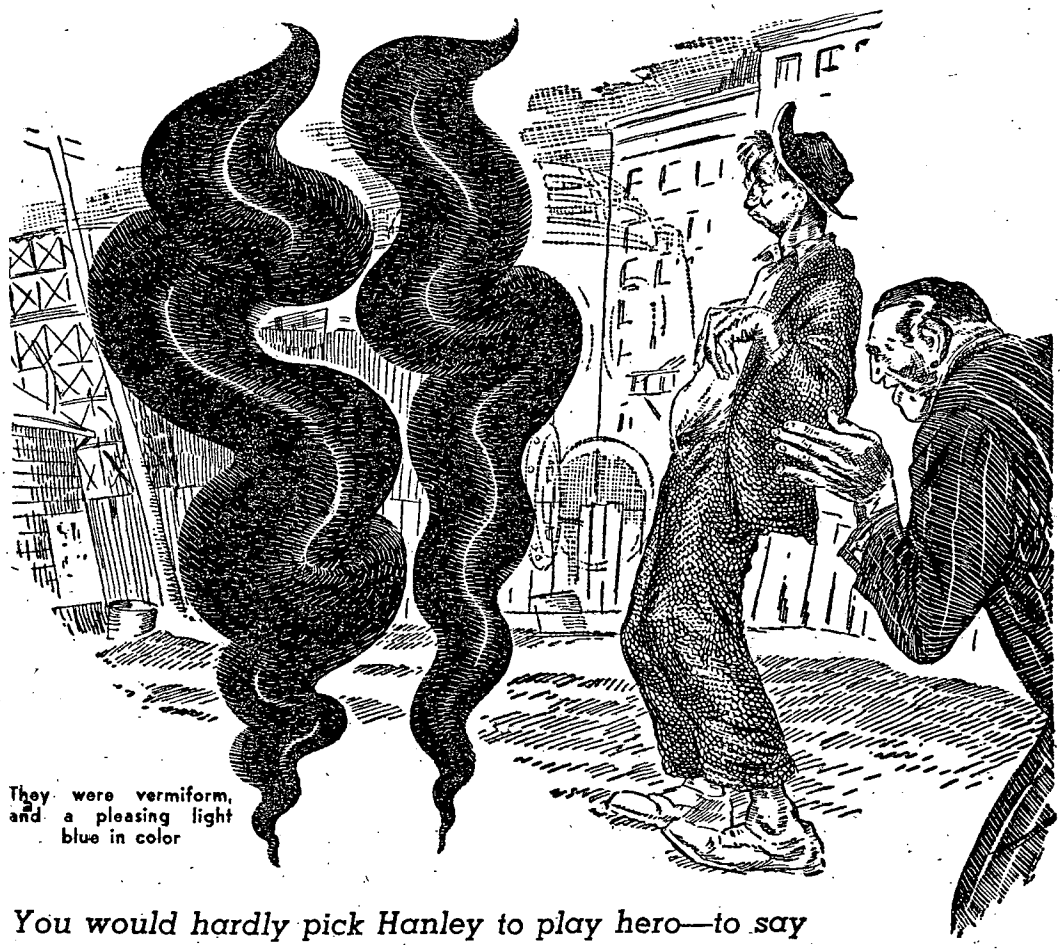
MAN OF DISTINCTION



They were vermiform, and a pleasing light blue in color

You would hardly pick Hanley to play hero—to say nothing of saving our Earth from alien invasion—yet Al Hanley, hero or no, did just exactly that!

By FREDRIC BROWN

THERE was this Hanley, Al Hanley, and you wouldn't have thought to look at him that he was ever going to amount to much. And if you'd known his life history, up to the time the Darians came you'd never have guessed how thankful you're going to be—once you've read this story—for Al Hanley.

At the time it happened Hanley was drunk. Not that that was anything unusual—he'd been drunk a long time and it was his ambition to stay that way although it had reached the stage of being a tough job. He had run out of money, then out of friends to borrow from. He had worked his way down his list of acquaintances to the point where he considered himself lucky to average two

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bits a head on them.

He had reached the sad stage of having to walk miles to see someone he knew slightly so he could try to borrow a buck or a quarter. The long walk would wear off the effects of the last drink—well, not completely but somewhat—so he was in the predicament of Alice when she was with the Red Queen and had to do all the running she could possibly do just to stay in the same place.

And panhandling strangers was out because the cops had been clamping down on it and if Hanley tried that he'd end up spending a drinkless night in the hoosegow, which would be very bad indeed. He was at the stage now where twelve hours without a drink would give him the bull horrors, which are to the D. T.'s as a cyclone is to a zephyr.

D. T.'s are merely hallucinations. If you're smart you know they're not there. Sometimes they're even companionship if you care for that sort of thing. But the bull horrors are the bull horrors. It takes more drinking than most people can manage to get them and they can come only when a man who's been drunk for longer than he can remember is suddenly and completely deprived of drink for an extended period, as when he is in jail, say.

The mere thought of them had Hanley shaking. Shaking specifically the hand of an old friend, a bosom companion whom he had seen only a few times in his life and then under not-too-favorable circumstances. The old friend's name was Kid Eggleston and he was a big but battered ex-pug who had more recently been bouncer in a saloon, where Hanley had met him naturally.

But you needn't concentrate on remembering either his name or his history because he isn't going to last very long as far as this story is concerned. In fact, in exactly one and one-half minutes he is going to scream and then faint and we shall hear no more of him.

But in passing let me mention that if Kid Eggleston *hadn't* screamed and fainted you might not be here now, reading this. You might be strip-mining glanic ore under a green sun at the far edge of the galaxy. You wouldn't like that at all so remember that it was Hanley who saved—and is still saving—you from it. Don't be too hard on him. If Three and Nine had taken the Kid things would be very different.

Three and Nine were from the planet Dar, which is the second (and only habitable) planet of the aforementioned green star at the far edge of the galaxy. Three and Nine were not, of course, their full names. Darians' names are numbers and Three's full name or number was 389,057,792,869,223. Or, at least, that would be its translation into the decimal system.

I'm sure you'll forgive me for calling him Three as well as for calling his companion Nine and for having them so address each other. They themselves would *not* forgive me. One Darian always addresses another by his full number and any abbreviation is not only discourteous but insulting. However Darians live much longer than we. They can afford the time and I can't.

AT THE moment when Hanley was shaking the Kid's hand Three and Nine were still about a mile away in an upward direction. They weren't in an airplane or even in a space-ship (and definitely not in a flying saucer. Sure I know what flying saucers are but ask me about them some other time. Right now I want to stick to the Darians). They were in a space-time cube.

I suppose I'll have to explain that. The Darians had discovered—as we may someday discover—that Einstein was right. Matter cannot travel faster than the speed of light without turning into energy. And you wouldn't want to turn into energy, would you? Neither did the Darians when they started their explorations throughout the galaxy.

So they worked it out that one can travel in effect faster than the speed of light if one travels through time simultaneously. Through the time-space continuum, that is, rather than through space itself. Their trip from Dar covered a distance of 163,000 light years.

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But since they simultaneously traveled back into the past 1,630 centuries the elapsed time to them had been zero for the journey. On their return they had traveled 1,630 centuries into the future and arrived at their starting point in the space-time continuum. You see what I mean, I hope.

Anyway there was this cube, invisible to terrestrials, a mile over Philadelphia (and don't ask me why they picked Philadelphia—I don't know why anyone would pick Philadelphia for anything). It had been poised there for four days while Three and Nine had picked up and studied radio broadcasts until they were able to speak and understand the prevailing language.

Not, of course, anything at all about our civilization, such as it is, and our customs, such as they are. Can you imagine trying to picture the life of inhabitants of Earth by listening to a mixture of giveaway contests, soap operas, Charlie McCarthy and the Lone Ranger?

Not that they really cared what our civilization was as long as it wasn't highly enough developed to be any threat to them—and they were pretty sure of that by the end of four days. You can't blame them for getting that impression and anyway it was right.

"Shall we descend?" Three asked Nine.

"Yes," Nine said to Three. Three curled himself around the controls.

". . . sure and I saw you fight," Hanley was saying. "And you were good, Kid. You must've had a bad manager or you'd have hit the top. You had the stuff. How about having a drink with me around the corner?"

"On you or on me, Hanley?"

"Well, at the moment I am a little broke, Kid. But I *need* a drink. For old times' sake—"

"You need a drink like I need a hole in my head. You're drunk now and you'd better sober up before you get the D. T.'s."

"Got 'em now," Hanley said. "Think nothing of 'em. Look, there they are coming up behind you."

Illogically, Kid Eggleston turned and looked. He screamed and fainted. Three and Nine were approaching. Beyond them was the shadowy outline of a monstrous cube twenty feet to a side. The way it was there and yet wasn't was a bit frightening. That must have been what scared the Kid.

There wasn't anything frightening about Three and Nine. They were vermiform, about fifteen feet long (if stretched out) and about a foot thick in the middle, tapering at both ends. They were a pleasing light blue in color and had no visible sense organs so you couldn't tell which end was which—and it didn't really matter because both ends were exactly alike anyway.

And, although they were coming toward Hanley and the now recumbent Kid, there wasn't even a front end or a back end. They were in the normal coiled position and floating.

"Hi, boys," Hanley said. "You scared my friend, blast you. And he'd have bought me a drink after he lectured me for awhile. So you owe me one."

"Reaction illogical," Three said to Nine. "So was that of the other specimen. Shall we take both?"

"No. The other one, although larger, is obviously a weakling. And one specimen will be sufficient. Come."

Hanley took a step backwards. "If you're going to buy me a drink, okay. Otherwise I want to know, where?"

"Dar."

"You mean we're going from here to Dar? Lissen, Massah, Ah ain't gwine noplace 'tall 'thout you-all buy me a drink."

"Do you understand him?" Nine asked Three. Three wriggled an end negatively. "Shall we take him by force?"

"No need if he'll come voluntarily. Will you enter the cube voluntarily, creature?"

"Is there a drink in it?"

"Yes. Enter, please."

HANLEY walked to the cube and entered it. Not that he believed it was really there, of course, but what

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did he have to lose? And when you had the D. T.'s it was best to humor them. The cube was solid, not at all amorphous or even transparent from the inside. Three coiled around the controls and delicately manipulated delicate mechanisms with both ends.

"We are in intraspace," he told Nine. "I suggest we remain here until we have studied this specimen further and can give a report on whether he is suitable for our purposes."

"Hey, boys, how about that drink?" Hanley was getting worried. His hands were beginning to shake and spiders were crawling up and down the length of his spine on the inside.

"He seems to be suffering," Nine said. "Perhaps from hunger or thirst. What do these creatures drink? Hydrogen peroxide as we do?"

"Most of the surface of their planet seems to be covered with water in which sodium chloride is present. Shall we synthesize some?"

Hanley yelled, "No! Not even water *without* salt. I want a drink! Whiskey!"

"Shall I analyze his metabolism?" Three asked. "With the intrafluoroscope I can do it in a second." He unwound himself from the controls and went to a strange machine. Lights flashed. Three said, "How strange. His metabolism depends on C_2H_5OH."

"C_2H_5OH?"

"Yes, alcohol—at least, basically. With a certain dilution of H_2O and without the sodium chloride present in their seas, as well as exceedingly minor quantities of other ingredients, it seems to be all that he has consumed for at least an extended period. There is .234% present in his blood stream and in his brain. His entire metabolism seems to be based on it."

BOYS," Hanley begged. "I'm *dying* for a drink. How's about laying off the double-talk and giving me one."

"Wait, please," Nine said. "I shall make you what you require. Let me use the verniers on that intrafluoroscope and add the psychometer." More lights flashed and Nine went into the corner of the cube which was a laboratory. Things happened there and he came back in less than a minute. He carried a beaker containing slightly less than two quarts of clear amber fluid.

Hanley sniffed it, then sipped it. He sighed.

"I'm dead," he said. "This is *usquebaugh*, the nectar of the gods. There isn't any such drink as *this*." He drank deeply and it didn't even burn his throat.

"What is it, Nine?" Three asked.

"A quite complex formula, fitted to his exact needs. It is fifty per-cent alcohol, forty-five per-cent water. The remaining ingredients, however, are considerable in number; they include every vitamin and mineral his system requires, in proper proportion and all tasteless. Then other ingredients in minute quantities to improve the taste—by his standards. It would taste horrible to us, even if we could drink either alcohol or water."

Hanley sighed and drank deeply. He swayed a little. He looked at Three and grinned. "Now I *know* you aren't there," he said.

"What does he mean?" Nine asked Three.

"His thought processes seem completely illogical. I doubt if his species would make suitable slaves. But we'll make sure, of course. What is your name, creature?"

"What's in a name, pal?" Hanley asked. "Call me anything. You guys are my bes' frien's. You can take me anywhere and jus' lemme know when we get Dar."

He drank deeply and lay down on the floor. Strange sounds came from him but neither Three nor Nine could identify them as words. They sounded like "Zzzzzz, glup—Zzzzzz, glup—Zzzzzz, glup." They tried to prod him awake and failed.

They observed him and made what tests they could. It wasn't until hours later that he awoke. He sat up and stared at them. He said, "I don't believe it. You aren't here. For Gossake, give me a drink quick."

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THEY gave him the beaker again—Nine had replenished it and it was full. Hanley drank. He closed his eyes in bliss. He said, "Don't wake me."

"But you are awake."

"Then don't put me to sleep. Jus' figured what this is. Ambrosia—stuff the gods drink."

"Who are the gods?"

"There aren't any. But this is what they drink. On Olympus."

Three said, "Thought processes completely illogical."

Hanley lifted the beaker. He said, "Here is here and Dar is Dar and never the twain shall meet. Here's to the twain." He drank.

Three asked, "What is a twain?"

Hanley gave it thought. He said, "A twain is something that wuns on twacks, and you wide on it from here to Dar."

"What do you know about Dar?"

"Dar ain't no such things as you are. But here's to you, boys." He drank again.

"Too stupid to be trained for anything except simple physical labor," Three said. "But if he has sufficient stamina for that we can still recommend a raid in force upon this planet. There are probably three or four billion inhabitants. And we can use unskilled labor—three or four billion would help us considerbly."

"Hooray!" said Hanley.

"He does not seem to coordinate well," Three said thoughtfully. "But perhaps his physical strength is considerable. Creature, what shall we call you?"

"Call me Al, boys." Hanley was getting to his feet.

"Is that your name or your species? In either case is it the full designation?"

Hanley leaned against the wall. He considered. "Species," he said. "Stands for—let's make it Latin." He made it Latin.

"We wish to test your stamina. Run back and forth from one side of this cube to the other until you become fatigued. Here, I will hold that beaker of your food."

He took the beaker out of Hanley's hands. Hanley grabbed for it. "One more drink. One more li'l drink. Then I'll run for you. I'll run for President."

"Perhaps he needs it," Three said. "Give it to him, Nine."

It might be his last for awhile so Hanley took a long one. Then he waved cheerily at the four Darians who seemed to be looking at him. He said, "See you at the races, boys. All of you. An' bet on me. Win, place an' show. 'Nother li'l drink first?"

He had another little drink—really a short one this time—less than two ounces.

"Enough," Three said. "Now run."

Hanley took two steps and fell flat on his face. He rolled over on his back and lay there, a blissful smile on his face.

"Incredible!" Three said. "Perhaps he is attempting to fool us. Check him, Nine."

Nine checked. "Incredible!" he said. "Indeed incredible after so little exertion but he is completely unconscious—unconscious to the degree of being insensible to pain. And he is not faking. His type is completely useless to Dar. Set the controls and we shall report

[*Turn page*]

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back. And take him, according to our subsidiary orders, as a specimen for the zoological gardens. He'll be worth having there. Physically he is the strangest specimen we have discovered on any of several million planets."

Three wrapped himself around the controls and used both ends to manipulate mechanisms. A hundred and sixty-three thousand light years and 1,630 centuries passed, cancelling each other out so completely and perfectly that neither time nor distance seemed to have been traversed.

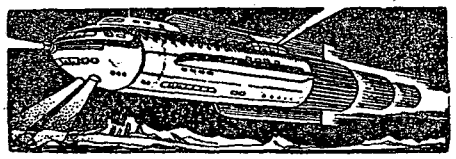
In the capital city of Dar, which rules thousands of useful planets, and has visited millions of useless ones—like Earth—Al Hanley occupies a large glass cage in a place of honor as a truly amazing specimen.

There is a pool in the middle of it, from which he drinks often and in which he has been known to bathe. It is filled with a constantly flowing supply of a beverage that is delicious beyond all deliciousness, that is to the best whiskey of Earth as the best whiskey of Earth is to bathtub gin made in a dirty bathtub. Moreover it is fortified —tastelessly—with every vitamin and mineral his metabolism requires.

It causes no hangovers or other unpleasant consequences. It is a drink as delightful to Hanley as the amazing conformation of Hanley is delightful to the frequenters of the zoo, who stare at him in bewilderment and then read the sign on his cage, which leads off in what looks to be Latin with the designation of his species as Al told it to Three and Nine:

ALCOHOLICUS ANONYMOUS
Lives on diet of C_2H_5OH, slightly fortified with vitamins and minerals. Occasionally brilliant but completely illogical. Extent of stamina—able to take only a few steps without falling. Utterly without value commercially but a fascinating specimen of the strangest form of life yet discovered in the Galaxy. Habitat—Planet 3 of Sun JX6547-HG908.

So strange, in fact, that they have given him a treatment that makes him practically immortal. And a good thing that is, because he's so interesting as a zoological specimen that if he ever dies they might come back to Earth for another one. And they might happen to pick up you or me—and you or I, as the case might be, might happen to be sober. And that would be bad for all of us.



HOW TO BE A DEMIGOD

IT'S not too difficult. All you have to do is crash your ship on a "lost" planet where human metabolism has become so souped up that, to its inhabitants, two hours are as twenty-four, a month is like a year. This is what Michael Hayes, space-flyer; Smith Jacobs, scientist, and Liza Farren, sociologist, found on Planus. Being human they enjoyed the demigod treatment they got from the natives—but being human, as time went by, worship began to affect them in oddly unpleasant ways. This situation is brought to a rousing climax in—

MILORDS METHUSELAH

A Complete Novelet

By CARTER SPRAGUE

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

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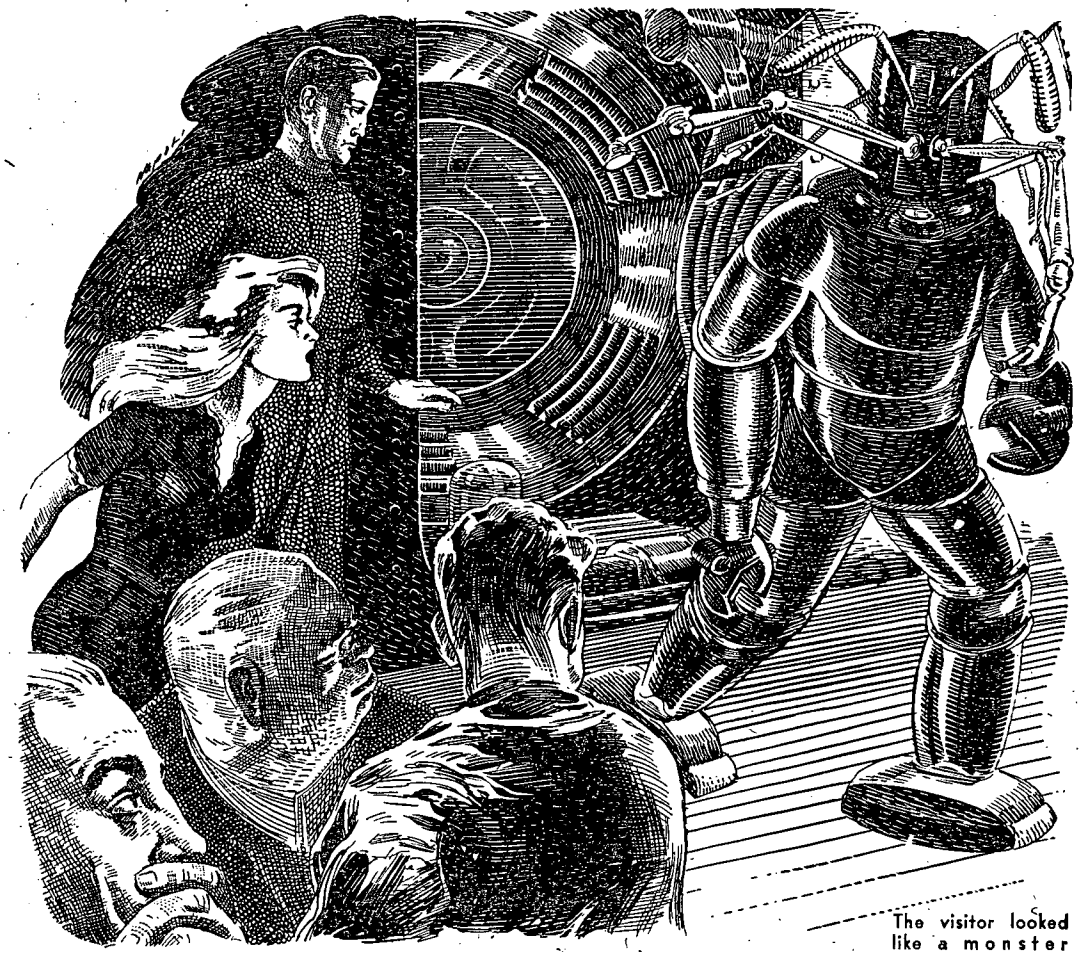

The visitor looked like a monster

FINAL HAVEN

by MATT LEE

When our planet passes through its self-inflicted Judgment Day, who is to say which shall be chosen?

ANSTRUTHER had just succeeded in putting Leland's queen in check when a shadow fell across the board. He looked up with a flicker of annoyance and transfixed the slim rumpled young man who had entered the room without knocking—Anstruther's steady piercing blue eyes, along with his connections and ambition, he himself rated as a major factor in his lifetime of success.

"Yes?" he said, his voice cold. It was no time to let down the bars. He wished, not for the first time in the past ninety

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days that he had not had the floors of the Haven so softly carpeted.

But the younger man seemed unabashed. He glowed with inner excitement as he ran long strong fingers through his disheveled red hair and said, "I just got something on the radarscope —I think we're going to have visitors."

Anstruther transferred his gaze to Leland. Leland was staring up at young Doran, who had brought the message. His face matched the hue of his knuckles, which were paper white from the pressure he was putting on them to grip the sides of the chess table.

"Don't be a fool, Phil," Anstruther said sharply. "We may not want to be found. Pull yourself together until we find out more about them—if the message isn't a false alarm."

He didn't say "another" false alarm because it was the first report of any life or activity the radarscope had picked up in the three months they had been living in the Haven.

"But, Cabot," Philip Leland protested, "we've got to be found. For all we know we may be the last persons left." He did not add the words "alive on Earth" because there was no need. The thought had been their omnipresent if unspoken companion ever since they had successfully escaped the debacle which had overwhelmed Earth.

"And then again we may not. Perhaps 'they' managed things better. I hardly think we want 'them' to find us." The lateral pull of fear was powerful beneath Anstruther's perfectly cut Tattersall vest but he kept his voice cool and steady, rose deliberately.

"Very well, Doran," he said to the younger man. "Let us examine this finding of yours." Then dropping his voice, "It might be well to withhold this information from the others—just in case."

"Yes, Mr. Anstruther," said Doran. If there was servility in neither his voice nor his bearing the habit of respect for a superior was hard to break—even at such close quarters as those in which they had all been living under during the three months past.

There were four of them beyond Cabot Anstruther, Philip Leland and young Christopher Doran. These three, of course, were the most important—Anstruther, who conceived the Haven, had obtained the backing to build it from Leland, the engineering talent and knowledge for its construction from the genius of Doran.

The remaining four consisted of Anstruther's magnificent young wife, Lois —Ted Martin, his forty-year-old former chauffeur—Martin's wife, Sarah, who was also the cook—and their daughter, Patsy, whose functions beyond that of all-around maidservant were not as yet clearly defined.

If the world were actually totally devoid of life, as Anstruther had more than once thought, it might devolve upon the girl to become the new Eve—since Lois Anstruther remained stubbornly childless.

THE two older men followed Doran into the communications room—a room which no pre-destruction submarine in the world could have matched. There were distance-scanning screens, their length of focus regulated by an extension aerial fifty feet above them, which could be telescopically extended almost a quarter of a mile in the air.

There were, above them, the cycloramic television screens on which they had witnessed the holocaust shortly after sealing themselves safely in the Haven beneath the blazing surface of a self-destroying world. There were radio receiving and vectoring and spectroscopic devices which had hitherto been seen only in certain secret rooms at M.I.T.—or what was left of it a half dozen miles to the north. The room was a communications-man's nirvana.

Doran went to one of three tables which were topped with incredibly complicated rows of switches, buttons, dials and indicators. He pressed and turned a number of them, studying one of the distance screens intently as he did so. He frowned as he picked up a slowly moving pip of light on one of them.

"Whatever it is, it's coming in fast," he said.

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"Is it coming this way?" Leland asked, his voice trembling.

"Directly," said Doran quietly. "If it were possible I'd say they had some sort of beam on us—a locator beam perhaps."

"Don't be absurd," said Anstruther, more annoyed at his own inner tension than at that of his companions. But as he watched the inexorable motion of that pip of light he felt his protests fade and said, "How soon can you get them on the television?"

"Any second now," Doran replied. "If I run the aerial up to full I ought to be able to spot them."

"You'll do no such thing," Anstruther told him firmly. "If you run it up they might catch the motion in some sort of detector." He spoke with the ingrained conservatism of a successful Boston investment banker. "We'll have to try them at low."

"Just as you say, Mr. Anstruther," said Doran quietly. But there was defiance lurking beneath his acquiescence. Anstruther was about to speak to him sharply when he became aware of a change in the carefully filtered air of the room about him.

"Lois—what are you doing in here?" he asked, turning to face his wife, who was leaning against one side of the door, displaying her slack-and-sweater-clad figure to opulent advantage and puffing on a long cigarette in a longer silver-and-ivory holder. Lois Anstruther's skin had grown milk-white in three months underground and her hair had darkened by three shades—neither alteration making her any the less magnificent.

"Thought I'd look in on the excitement, darling," she said. To Anstruther her drawl, which he had once found entrancing, had become a mockery not only of true breeding but of himself.

"Don't tell me something's moving out there," she said, regarding the screen with awakening interest. "What is it?"

"Probably a meteor," Anstruther snapped. Then, irked at his loss of control and therefore of face, "If the air above us has been largely burned away there is little to stop meteors."

"Don't be ridiculous, Cabot," said his wife. "You know as well as I that no meteor would travel that slowly."

This was another thing Anstruther had grown to dislike about his wife since their enforced incarceration in the Haven. She had a way of coming up with annoying and utterly irrefutable bits of unexpected knowledge. It was the more annoying because he had definitely not married her for her brains.

His first wife had had too many of those—but she had also had the Cold Roast Boston money he needed to establish him on the State Street road to wealth—which to him meant success. When she died Anstruther had waited for a suitable interval, so as not to cause comment among his more staid and important clients, then had married Lois Saint Clair of the North American Ballet.

It would be just his luck, he thought acidly, to draw for a wife a ballerina with brains and no talent for giving him an heir. He continued to regard her with irritation—a regard which she ignored utterly—until a sharp exclamation from Leland drew his attention back to the screens—this time the television screens.

"There she goes!" cried the shell of what had been until recently the fourth richest private citizen in the United States.

"I see nothing—nothing at all," Anstruther protested.

"Something flashed out of sight behind Blue Hill," said Chris Doran. "If you had let me use the aerial we'd have got a look at her. As it is, she's too low behind the hill."

"We may not want to find her," Anstruther said firmly.

"Isn't that just like my banker boy?" said Lois with what her husband took to be mockery. She went on to say, "Here we may have a chance of rescue—but Cabot's afraid to find out until he learns if they're the right sort of people. And because he's afraid he won't let any of us find out. Really, Cabot—"

"That's quite enough, my dear." An-

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struther cut her off. "Remember, if it weren't for me we'd all have been dead three months."

"True enough," said Leland, his eyes on Lois.

She laughed shortly and said, "Sometimes it's hard to tell whether we are or aren't dead—buried underground this way. Well, *I'm* going to have a drink since the excitement's over. Anyone care to join me?"

"I'd be glad to, Lois," said Leland, darting a furtive, half-apologetic look toward Anstruther. Anstruther looked the other way and both of them withdrew. He was in no mood just then to get into a game of vocal volley ball with Lois. These contests amounted to another sort of game which he had yet to win from her.

HE LINGERED with Doran in the communications room, aware of a growing indecision which he found increasingly disturbing. His entire life had been spent, step by step, in preparing himself ahead of time for any decisions he might have to make. In a way its culmination had been not only recognition of what was about to overwhelm the Earth but the successful taking of steps to ensure his survival and that of those he deemed essential to his life.

Others, of course, had foreseen the outbreak of a war which might well mean destruction of life on the planet if not the planet itself. The papers and magazines had been full of their dire prophecies, the air hideous with their caterwaulings.

But only Cabot Anstruther, as far as he knew, had taken steps to face and meet the unthinkable. It was he who had filched Christopher Doran from his vital job at M.I.T., who had put the building of the Haven up to him as a hypothetical proposition, who had then, abetted by his own and Leland's millions, enabled him to turn the purely hypothetical into reality.

Forewarned of the catastrophe by certain "inside" sources, the banker had enabled these seven of his choice to escape to the Haven scant hours ahead of the disaster itself. It had taken a brilliant bit of organization to make even limited survival possible.

Now, however, he was faced with a problem for which he was without preparation—for beyond survival he had not foreseen, and now the possibilities latent in survival itself frightened him.

He had imagined a snug existence here in the Haven until the various recording devices Doran had arranged informed them that the surface fifty feet above them was again safe for humanity. Then they could emerge and recommence life above at their leisure—with a world to themselves.

He stared blankly at Doran, not really seeing him, wondering who these visitors were, how they had spotted the Haven if they actually had spotted it. He was about to reassure himself that it was impossible when all the instruments went crazy at once and a rasping roar came from the radio receiver.

"What is it?" he shouted, his voice almost a scream in the silence that fell suddenly as Doran deftly flipped key switches.

The brilliant young scientist shrugged and said, "It looks as if they've blocked us completely." He frowned. "They must have stuff we never heard of at M.I.T. if they can do that."

"Who do you think it is?" Anstruther inquired anxiously.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Doran replied and for the first time in Anstruther's memory he forgot to use some term of courteous respect. The banker's eyes frosted but before he could speak young Doran flipped his switches on again.

Another voice filled the room, a strange voice which bore a trace of accent Anstruther found hard to place. It said, "We have you under observation and are about to send an emissary to visit you. If you treat him properly you will not be harmed in any way. If you do not you will be destroyed."

The message was repeated, then silence followed. Doran turned to Anstruther with a faint suggestion of a

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smile on his lips. He was, the banker thought, almost too good looking in a wild, socially undisciplined manner.

"What now?" the red-headed scientist inquired softly.

"Can they destroy us?" Anstruther countered.

"I'd hate to bet against it," said the younger man. "If they can spot us as they did and crack our communications it's a good bet they can knock us out one way or another."

"There were spies everywhere," muttered the banker, frowning uneasily. "Perhaps they had advance knowledge about the Haven."

"It's a little late to worry," said Doran. He half whistled as a pair of lights flashed on another dial, added, "Baby, they move fast! Our visitor seems to be knocking."

"Let him in," said Anstruther, turning away to hide the fact that his lips, like his hands, were trembling. He was frightened as he had not been since his governess left him alone in a darkened room when he was five—and the fact was humiliating.

BUT when the visitor came through the final steel-lead-and-asbestos door of the vast series of vaults that comprised the Haven, Anstruther was standing just within the entrance, in rigid control of his features if not of his innermost self. At his shoulder was an openly shivering Leland, behind them were Doran, Lois Anstruther and the Martins.

For a moment the banker thought the visitor was some sort of an alien monster. He wore strange bulky clothing and an unfamiliar octagonal helmet that seemed to be made of impenetrable black glass and sprouted numerous and varied antennae. His feet were heavy blobs of metal, his hands lobsterlike instruments of dull metal. For a moment he stood there, regarding them eyelessly.

Then his instrument hands went to his helmet, pushed a pair of buttons and lifted it from his shoulders. The Martin girl gasped at this apparent decapitation, then exhaled her relief as a perfectly human-looking head was revealed in its place.

"Good day, people," he said in a voice which was reminiscent in flatness of tone and accent of that which had sounded in the communications room a few minutes earlier. He nodded a trifle stiffly in his metal collar and even smiled after a fashion.

He looked, Anstruther thought, uncouth, even crude. His features, while pleasant enough, were dull in contour, a trifle flat. His eyes were grey, his forehead low, wide and bumpy, his hair a sort of roan color and closely cropped.

Doran stepped forward then, said, "May I help you out of this gear?" and extended the hand of assistance.

"Thank you very much," said the stranger politely. A half minute later he stood before them, revealed as a chunky male individual, thirtyish in years, with a medium-tall and powerful looking body well concealed by light blue coveralls. He wore an odd golden insigne on his chest—an insigne that looked like a curved comet.

"May I ask you who you are?" Anstruther inquired, nodding.

"Tanlev is about as easy as I can make it for you," the newcomer said pleasantly. "I've been sent to take you out of here—some of you at any rate."

Anstruther found himself distrusting this newcomer and therefore disliking him. There was nothing by which he could measure this man, no scale of values by which he could estimate either his worth or his danger to the Haven. And that accent . . .

"Tell me, Tanlev," he said quietly, "do you speak Russian?"

The visitor smiled and nodded. "Of course," he told them. "I speak the ten chief languages of Earth."

"Are you Russian?" Anstruther asked him bluntly. He had an ingrained fear of Russia and everything that might emanate from it.

"No, I'm not Russian," said the stranger, smiling his amusement. "I don't suppose I'm a citizen of anywhere exactly."

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"Oh," said Anstruther, feeling disdain rise within him. "One of those." He corrected himself, remembering the threat which had accompanied announcement of his coming, said, "Perhaps the Earth as we will find it outside is no longer the same."

"No," said the visitor, "it is no longer much of anything."

"Never mind," said Lois. She stepped forward, announced that they should all be ashamed for their lack of hospitality to a rescuer, led him to the living room beyond the library and got drinks and a snack organized and under way.

Tanlev seemed appreciative. Eyeing his half-empty glass he said, "You people seem to have done very well indeed. Perhaps you can tell me how you happened to plan for survival. I assure you very few others on this globe have been able to manage it."

Anstruther's first impulse was to be as curt and uninformative as possible. But there was no restraining the others—not with someone new and different to talk to when they had resigned themselves to each other's company for the rest of their lives.

Leland began to blab like a fool. Lois abetted him and after awhile even Doran joined in. They showed him the living quarters, the atomically filtered springwater supply and storage tanks. They showed him the vast refrigerators and hydroponic vegetable gardens, the deep freezes and air-growing tanks and conditioners. They showed him the communications room and how it worked, explained the atom-proofing of the walls about them, the roof above.

Their visitor seemed visibly impressed and told them so across the dining room table. He had visited, he said, other survivors of the holocaust and none had planned so well or so successfully. The Haven, he assured them, was truly named.

FINALLY, over cigars and fine old London Dock brandy from Leland's famed Commonwealth Avenue cellars, Anstruther asked, "Perhaps you'll tell us something, sir—just where you come from and whom you represent here?"

A shadow crossed the visitor's face and he made a slight gesture of distress. "It is always so difficult," he said in his curious accent. "You will find it hard to believe. You see neither my people nor I are of this planet at all."

"I don't believe you," Anstruther snapped. "Where are your tentacles or whatever? And how and why are you here?"

"Your reaction is quite normal, Mr. Anstruther," Tanlev told them drily. "It is difficult for any of you to accept the fact that the human species is by no means confined to this poor ruined planet. However, I assure you this is the case. And I can easily furnish proof if you insist."

"I do," said Anstruther rising. "Show me."

Mere minutes later he stood in the communications room, tight-lipped, convinced. What Tanlev had shown them through the television screens of the interior of the ship that had brought him to Milton went beyond all thought of refutal. It was—superhuman. If Anstruther needed other proof a glance at Doran's look of incredulous and delighted wonder would have supplied it.

But he managed to retain his self-control. "Very well," he told Tanlev when the demonstration was ended. "Where are you from and why are you here—and who is behind you?"

He told them—easily and with a graphic sincerity that even the banker had to credit. His people were the first humans of the Solar System. They had inhabited the super-planet between Mars and Jupiter whose disintegration had produced the asteroids.

"It was the same story," he told them. "We got in a war and blew ourselves up. Our science was further advanced and we actually detonated our home planet. But more of us managed to survive."

He told them of the strange fractional Utopias these survivors had managed to create upon and within the remnants of their world, of their determination never to allow elements to arise within them that would promote or lead to war.

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"But without competition how did you manage to progress?" Anstruther inquired curiously.

"The strength of competition is a fallacy, I fear," Tanlev told them. "Cooperation is the only possible method to true growth without self-destruction. Believe me, we learned it the hard way."

They had been unable to save Mars, to which some of their most warlike elements had escaped. But when the descendents of these aggressive folk had made the Red Planet uninhabitable they had saved those they could, those that would add to Asteroid culture without reinflicting the curse of war.

"And now, alas, we must perform the same task for Earth," he told them. "You see, you are descendents of the men of Mars."

"I'm afraid I cannot accept that," said Anstruther coolly. "After all, there is the matter of evolution."

"Another fallacy," said Tanlev. "Your primitive civilizations did not spring from the ape men in your museum. On the contrary, your ancestors exterminated them, Neanderthal and Cromagnon alike. I can prove it too if you insist."

"It would explain much—so much," murmured Lois, who had been listening, her eyes aglow with interest. "After all, the legend of Mars as the War God is worldwide—like the flood."

"Please—Lois," said Anstruther patiently. Then, to the visitor, "Now, Mr. Tanlev, supposing we accept your story for the time being—what are your plans for us?"

"We are here to return with us such survivors among you who will bring new blood and new life to our Asteroid-bound peoples," Tanlev told them simply. "Already we have sent several hundred to our homelands from various localities here."

"And they are willing to go?" Anstruther asked incredulously after a contemptuous glance at Leland, who had become quite glazed and stupid in drunken excitement.

"We take no one by force," Tanlev explained. Then, leaning a little toward them, "My purpose here is to select from among you those who will be suitable for transport across space. You have a right to the facts—which are chiefly that Earth is going to break out within a year in volcanic convulsions which will make it utterly uninhabitable for any reasonable sort of life."

"Why didn't you come here sooner?" Lois asked tragically. "Why didn't you put a stop to the warmongers that destroyed us?"

"Because, "Tanlev said more softly, "we could not. Had we come sooner we not only would not have stopped your warriors—we would have put new weapons in their hands, perhaps exposed the Planetoids themselves to destruction."

"And you intend to select some of us arbitrarily?" Anstruther asked. "And leave the others here to die?"

"Our orders give us no alternative," Tanlev told him. "We want only men and women capable of peaceful and mutual helpfulness."

"And just how do you intend to discover these abstract qualities?" the banker asked sharply. He was feeling somewhat reassured. After all, he had always been a man of peace—and as for progress he had been the incentive behind the Haven.

"We have our methods," Tanlev replied, smiling. "They will take a little while—a day or two, perhaps—during which time I should like to stay here with you. Have you a spare bedroom?"

IT WAS forty-two dreadful hours later. During that time tension had mounted steadily within the Haven while Tanlev loafed around, seemingly doing nothing at all but eat and drink and talk casually to them, individually and in groups.

Anstruther found that his appetite had faded for the first time in his memory, that he no longer either craved or enjoyed an occasional drink of fine liquor or one of the mellow Havanas with which the Haven was incredibly well stocked.

Increasingly he found himself hating this stranger, who had come from no-

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where to disrupt beyond repair the tight little underground cosmos he had so carefully planned and had built. He found himself snooping more and more on Tanlev's talks with the others. It was unthinkable that he, the leader, should be left behind—but there was always the chance.

He had learned nothing. Whenever he got within earshot, no matter how silently he moved, he discovered that Tanlev was either asking the others about Earth or telling them of his homeland. Yet somehow he felt that he was being left out of things.

Just this morning—although mornings, like the rest of ordinary time divisions, were arbitrary in the Haven—he had caught Lois regarding him with an odd and new sympathy that suggested both patronage and pity. And she had been increasingly kind to Leland—which at first had puzzled him.

It had never occurred to Anstruther before that Lois could prefer Leland to himself. True, Leland had more money—but he was physically ugly and without any flair for attracting women. He had been almost from birth condemned to bachelorhood. Those he could marry had always been obviously after his wealth.

But Leland had long been in love with Lois. Anstruther had noticed it even before their marriage, had taken it as merely another tribute to himself. He had wanted his new wife to be admired—but he had not wanted her to respond.

He sat by himself at the library chessboard, not seeing the problem he had arranged for himself to solve. Again a shadow fell across the board and he looked up, startled, to see Tanlev sitting across from him, that damnable superior smile on his face.

"Shall we play it out?" asked the Asteroid man.

Anstruther nodded and made the indicated first move. By all the laws of chess he ought to have had Tanlev in checkmate within a half dozen moves. But things did not work out that way and at the end of half an hour the banker discovered himself, impossibly, in a corner from which there was no escape.

"We play the game in three dimensions at home," Tanlev said casually, setting up his men for a new game. "It brings a new insight to the two-dimensional form."

Anstruther studied his opponent and his hatred gave him a flash of insight. He knew, all at once, that this was it. He said, "All right, Tanlev, I suppose your mind is made up."

"Right," the other said idly. "Yes, it's been made up for some time—or rather you have finished your tests, all of you."

"And I?" Anstruther asked, his tongue suddenly dry.

"You did very well," Tanlev told him. "Brilliantly, in fact. You have intellect, intelligence and education. Your qualities of leadership and your executive abilities as revealed to us show that you did not win your eminence on Earth by chance."

"You do me honor," said Anstruther, his ego expanding. "And how soon do we leave the Haven for your Asteroids?"

"Oh." Again the other spoke easily. "We'll be taking off within the next few minutes. Unfortunately you are not going."

"*What!*" The banker nearly upset the board as he sprang to his feet in consternation and sheer disbelief. "But you said . . ."

"It is always the hardest for your sort of man to understand," Tanlev told him. "You seem to think because you have achieved much on Earth that you deserve some sort of reward."

"But surely, if it's new blood and new ideas you are after, you cannot leave a man like myself behind," Anstruther protested. He was feeling a certain numbness he did not yet know was fear.

"Unfortunately you are the very sort of man we do *not* want," said the man from the Asteroids. "It is men like you—men, yes, and women—who have built only for themselves that have brought about the destruction of Earth."

"But I have always been a man of peace!" cried Anstruther as desperation rose like a tide within him.

"Only because you have never had to

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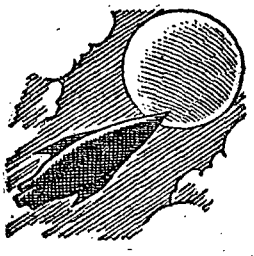
fight for what you wanted out of life," said Tanlev and to the banker he was unbearably like one of his long-forgotten schoolmasters at St. Swithin's. "You had wealth, power, connections, position—you might have had a hand in saving the two and a half billion lives this war has destroyed. Instead you concerned yourself only with your own survival."

"But surely—" Anstruther began, then checked hopelessly. How could he argue with anyone so hopelessly unrealistic?

"Surely, if enough men of power had said Tanlev. "It is also, fortunately, more prevalent for us to wish to serve and help one another cheerfully and without return. So the first thing we look for among those we scan is the wish to serve."

"Then it is slaves you want, not men," Anstruther almost shouted. Fear and anger were mounting within him and mingling. "And I suppose I have never served, have never helped in all my years as a banker and financial counsellor?"

"Never without receiving an exorbitant fee in return," the man from the Asteroids told him bluntly. "I am afraid



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fought against war it could have been avoided the world over. No, their natures forbade it—the struggle for personal power is an aggressive destructive instinct. It is the same that has now destroyed three worlds. Yet you pretend to call it admirable."

CRIED the banker, "Surely it is better to seek success than to let one's abilities rot and go to waste!"

"Not at the expense of others," said the man from the Asteroids. "Your very Bible tells you that repeatedly—and you might recall what Christ said about the rich man, the camel and the needle's eye. I presume you consider yourself a Christian."

"Poppycock!" said Anstruther, as ever growing angry when the portion of Christian doctrine he considered dangerously socialistic was quoted at him. "It's against human nature."

"Only against its inhuman elements," you are in for some further shocks, sir. Sarah Martin was the first among you to pass our tests."

"A cook—an unlettered old biddy!" snapped the banker.

"A cheerful, kind and entirely worthwhile person," said the younger man in refutation. "Her husband and daughter were next. And I'm sure you'll be glad to know that your wife came through well."

"*Lois*—you're not depriving me of Lois!" The banker jumped to his feet again. "But what has she done for others?" There was a sneer in his voice. "She even refused to bear me a child."

"That," said the other stunningly, "was not her fault but yours. You are, mercifully, incapable of children, sir."

Anstruther sank to his chair again, stunned. Somehow it never occurred to him to doubt. The younger man talked on.

"Your wife has given and can give

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much—her great talents as a dancer, as a person, as a mother, once the right mate is provided. She certainly is not of the aggressive type."

"But it's indecent," Anstruther protested weakly. "You can't just come in here and strip a man of his wife."

"We take no one who is not willing to leave with us," said the man from the Asteroids. "Remember? And you are speaking of the 'decencies' of a world that is virtually no longer in existence."

DULL rage returned the banker to sensibility.

"She would not leave me unless there were someone else," he stated.

"That I shall not presume to answer," said Tanlev. "But there *is* someone else, of course. May I add—inevitably?"

"You are insolent!" said the banker.

"No—I am truthful, which is quite another matter," Tanlev replied quietly. "How could there help but be someone else in her mind when you are so much older and so utterly self-preoccupied?"

"Then it is you—yourself!" Anstruther shouted bitterly.

Tanlev laughed. "Hardly," he replied. "We have long since passed beyond marriage where I come from but we keep our commitments honorably and mine have already been made. No, your Lois, I fear, is in love with someone from this accursed planet."

"That so-and-so!" snapped Anstruther, permitting himself the rare luxury of profanity in his emotional stress.

"He couldn't help it," said the younger man soothingly. "After all, none of us is completely the master of his desires."

"He won't get away with it." Anstruther's rage increased as he thought of his best friend, the man who had helped him to construct the Haven, stealing Lois away from him. He thought of Leland's ugliness and realized with a pang of jealousy that his rival had twenty times his own fortune.

The younger man handled him with ridiculous ease as he tried to rise and seek out his Judas and whip him to his knees. Anstruther was unable to do a thing but struggle feebly against the great muscles that held him and forced him slowly back into his chair.

He actually sobbed a little at his humiliation.

"I'm sorry," the younger man said with a gentleness that hurt worse than anger. "You're too late. The others took their departure while we were talking."

"You mean," cried Anstruther, "that I'm to be left alone?"

"No," said Tanlev with a faint smile of pity, "not alone, Mr. Anstruther. You will not be alone." He laid a powerful but gentle hand on the banker's shaking shoulder, then lifted it and was silently gone from the room. Anstruther only half-heard the faint click of the entry lock behind him minutes later—although it might as well have been the clank of doom.

He sat there and again a shadow fell across the board. He looked up and half rose to his feet in sheer surprise. "*You!*" he cried. "It's *you!* And all the time I've been thinking . . ."

"Yes, it's me, Cabot," said Philip Leland, taking the opposite chair. He seemed somehow, in final defeat, to have acquired a new strength and sureness, almost a new beauty. Anstruther looked at him and incredibly felt laughter rise within him.

"And all the time I've been thinking you and Lois . . ."

"I tried, Cabot," said Leland, eyeing the board, "but I didn't stand a chance, of course."

"Who was it?" the banker asked quietly.

His friend looked at him as if he didn't believe it possible.

"Good Lord, and I thought it was obvious," he said. "It was Doran, of course. Those two were made for each other."

"Doran," mused the banker. Yes, he had been a fool, blinding himself to the truth with his suspicions of Leland. But all at once he realized that it was a little late for jealousy, for anger, for self recrimination.

He began to arrange his own men on the red-and-black board.

"Your move, Phil," he said quietly.

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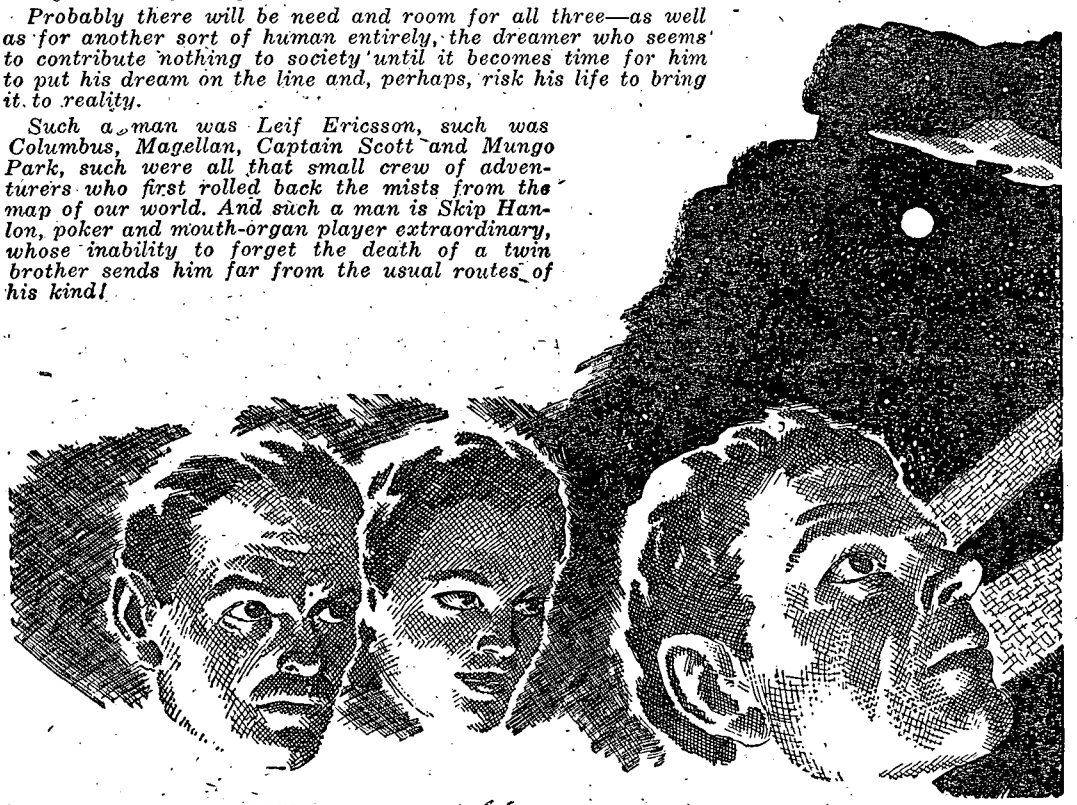
BROTHER WORLDS

ONE of the questions mankind is going to have to answer soon is—what makes a good spaceman? Must he be of the stuff of test-pilots, of laboratory geniuses, of rough hewn Forty-Niners of the galactic reaches?

Probably there will be need and room for all three—as well as for another sort of human entirely, the dreamer who seems to contribute nothing to society until it becomes time for him to put his dream on the line and, perhaps, risk his life to bring it to reality.

Such a man was Leif Ericsson, such was Columbus, Magellan, Captain Scott and Mungo Park, such were all that small crew of adventurers who first rolled back the mists from the map of our world. And such a man is Skip Hanlon, poker and mouth-organ player extraordinary, whose inability to forget the death of a twin brother sends him far from the usual routes of his kind!



CHAPTER I

Crazy Guy

TO the Moon-tourists from Podunk and New York "Skip" Hanlon used to say things like this—

". . . now this hole in the ash, roped off and kept for history, is where the first unmanned rocket from Earth hit Luna. Yeah—it was the first successful groping of humankind across the immeasurable reaches of space! Okay? If everybody has had a good peek, we'll get back into the ato-bus and head for yonder dome of Copernicus City, where we can shed our spacesuits and have lunch. . . ."

Skip was a windy swaggering little guy—with a soul. He had rubberneck-

Don Ellis, Space Engineer, Tells the Story of

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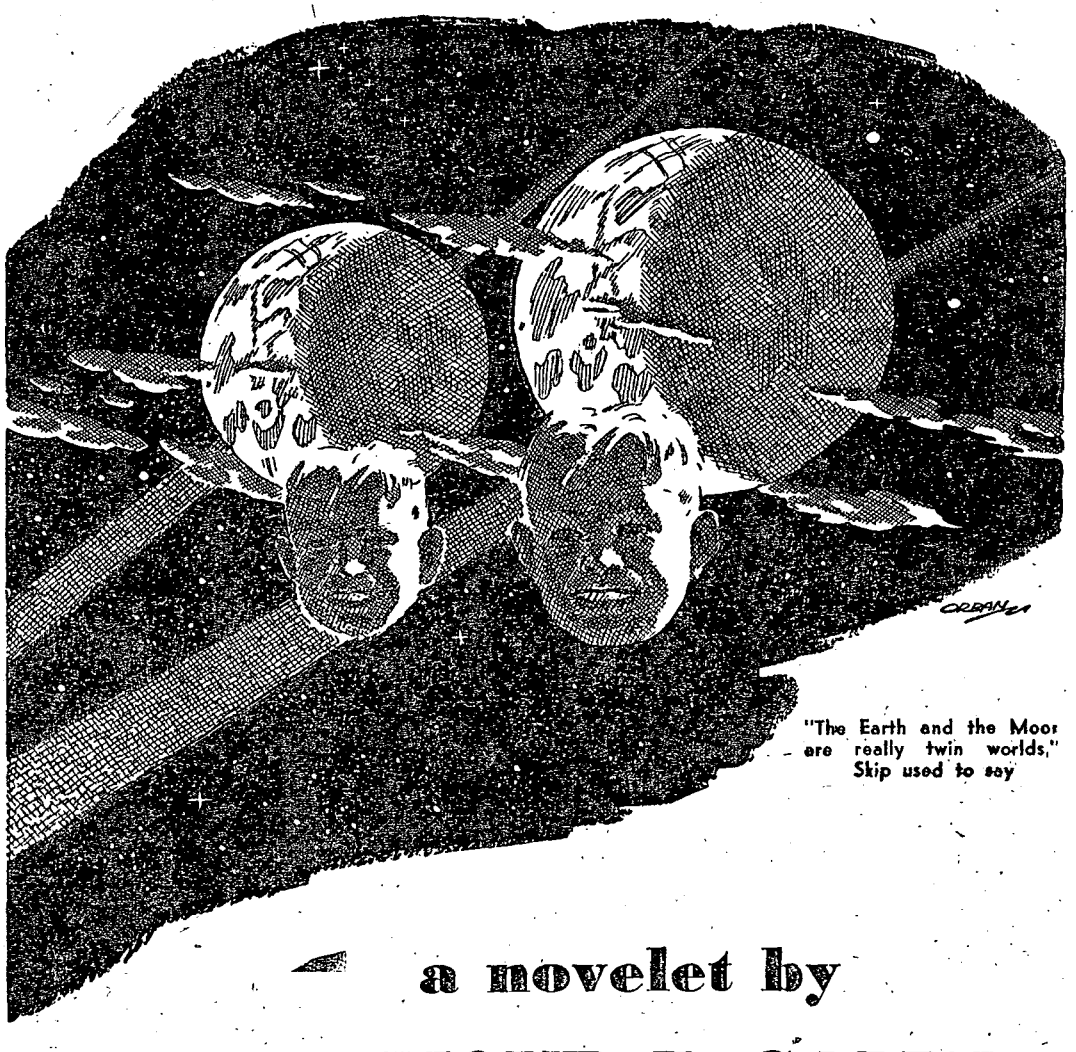

"The Earth and the Moon are really twin worlds," Skip used to say

a novelet by

RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

guide jobs when his luck and desire to work coincided. Otherwise he got by by loading spaceships, washing dishes, mopping in bars or simply panhandling.

He and I—Don Ellis is the name—had dashed off for the Moon from Chicago when we were twenty, and fresh from college.

A century ago guys like Skip Hanlon used to work their way on tramp steamers and ride the rods of freight-trains.

They're not ordinary bums. Not with a dog-eared volume of Shakespeare stuffed inside a dirty shirt or a space-boot. They hunger for knowledge. But they're romantic vagabonds—poets at

"Skip" Hanlon, the Space Bum Who Made Good!

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heart. They want to see everything beautiful, mysterious and distant.

They're short on industry and desire for material possession. They're idealistic, whimsical, and cynical. They can relax any place because the universe is home to them. They're absolutely unpompous and democratic. A millionaire tourist is as human to them as a miner in a battered spacearmor.

In a way they're the happiest of people—and the nicest. But there's always a restless sadness deep down in them.

About Skip, unreasonable as it may sound, this sadness usually seemed to concern the Earth and the Moon. One thing he used to say to his flocks of sightseers, while he made soft eyes at the girls among them, went like this—

"The Earth-Moon system isn't just a planet and its satellite. Compared to other planet-satellite systems the Earth is much too small, the Moon too large. They are really twin worlds. But one of the twins was stunted and stillborn. It couldn't even keep its atmosphere! Too bad that the twins couldn't have been more the same size. A pair of habitable spheres less than a quarter-million miles apart. Nice and friendly that would be, eh? Even if they fought . . ."

High up in Alaska, where there is still wilderness, Skip Hanlon was born a twin. Five years later a blizzard got in the way of medical science and Skip's brother died. At college and then on Luna, Skip used to carry around a snapshot of them both.

"Alan's the one with the lip stuck out, Don," he told me once. "He'd be bigger than me now. After he was gone Mom started calling me Skip instead of Davy. Because she had to put a clothesline tether on me to keep me from running off into the woods to look for Alan. Some brat I was."

Maybe if you go for deep psychology you can read into Skip's nature the transfer of a personal sorrow to a cosmic level—in the Earth and the Moon. Maybe, in his wanderlust, there was a subconscious quest to end loneliness.

Skip got along on the Moon, living hand-to-mouth, grinning, kidding, playing the harmonica, making friends quickly, then saying good-by as they shoved off, perhaps for Podunk or New York again.

Maybe I got along better than Skip. My education wasn't academic and impractical like his. I'm a trained mining engineer. I had plenty of jobs and was afield a lot. Besides, I cared about amounting to something. Skip didn't give a whoop.

WE had planned to shove on for Mars but we stuck around for a year. Skip's inertia did that. His vagabond spirit was as alive as ever but it had turned indolent and mellow.

Flopped on a cot in a public dormitory he'd blow a few bars of *Old Man River* or some other ancient song, grin at me past his mouth-organ and say, "Shucks. What's the rush, Don?"

The way he made it look it was the perfect philosophy—an answer for all the worriers and doers that sweat out their lives. There was no strain or hurry in it, no fear. And all the romance of the universe was at hand for the taking. Beyond the airdrome of Copernicus City, were the airless Lunal mountains, beautiful and ugly. The black sky held the planets and stars. In a way I envied Skip because part of me was like him.

But a change was brewing for Skip Hanlon. Perhaps, deep down, he guessed this by subconscious logic. In fact maybe so did I.

The Moon is Earth's spaceport for jumps into the farther distance. Held back by a gravity only one-sixth of the terrestrial, it takes much less power for a ship to build up high velocity to cover hundreds of millions of miles as fast as possible. And by the same token it takes less bow-rocket thrust to brake tremendous speed for a landing when there is less gravity tugging a ship ahead.

The same facts apply to craft that

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travel by that new principle and old term—overdrive. That is the interdimensional stuff that enables human beings to cross the light-years fast enough not to rob them of the meaning of their brief life-span.

A year before Skip and I journeyed to the Moon the first star-globe built on Earth had lunged out from Luna toward the nearest and most logical stellar goal—Proxima Centauri. Mankind's reaching for knowledge and dominance had gone beyond the Solar System.

Now the interval of two years and three months that the scientist-leader, Greg Northcross, had estimated as the time that must pass before his return from a stupendous trip, was drawing to a close. Weeks ahead, everybody on the Moon, Earth and the colonized planets had been alerted. They wondered tensely if the star-globe *Centaur* would really arrive. Or would there be only the enigma of extending years, telling nothing of high adventure and destruction?

A ship moving faster than light cannot send slower radio messages ahead to herald its approach. This made the wait more intriguing.

I was in Copernicus City, as I had kind of planned to be, for the hoped-for historic occasion. Skip and I were at the Spacemen's Club, playing pingpong —under Lunar gravity conditions, which makes keeping the ball on the table ridiculously hard to do—when the wall-speaker began to blare.

"Star-globe *Centaur* has snapped out of overdrive a million miles from Moon. It is a telescopic speck, like a tiny planetoid reflecting sunlight, and is still moving very fast by old standards. Radio contact has been established."

There was a long, agonizing pause. Then "Over to *Centaur*."

Later I would have recognized the next voice that spoke as that of "Big Greg" Northcross himself. "*Centaur* calling. No time to give information about expedition now. Help us in, Moon, with landing instructions. . . ."

I, Don Ellis, am a fairly well-muscled, fairly stolid specimen. But right then I got excited. I hit that pingpong ball much too hard and it sailed up to the ceiling. Who cared? The voice I had just heard was husky—as if the plunge into inconceivable distance had changed it somehow. And I had the idea that here was a man who had been to a farther and infinitely more interesting place than either heaven or hell and was coming back to tell about it.

People love glory—especially glory that they can share simply by being human. The first star had been reached by man. How many ages of dreaming lay behind that mighty triumph?

For a moment there was voiceless silence inside the Spacemen's Club. Nerves and muscles were petrified with awe.

Finally I regained my vocal powers. "This is it, Skip!" I yelled. "Let's go—spaceport!"

He didn't hear me—nor could I hear myself—because everyone was shouting at once and had the same idea of where to go. There was a rush and scramble of feet toward the nearest station of the tube-trains that went underground, beyond the crystal dome of Copernicus City and out to the port. Everybody wanted to take part in the grand reception of the heroes.

WELL, my buddy and I made it in the second packed trainload. We fought our way to the forefront of the mob, where, jammed against a police barrier, we could watch history from inside the glass-walled and pressurized depot—the *Centaur* lowering itself gently to the concrete surfacing of the port on a tripod of common atomic rocket-jets.

Big Gregg Northcross, gray and gaunt, and with scarred face, was the first to step down from the airlock. I knew him from his photographs. He waved to the crowd inside the depot, walked a bit unsteadily in his space-armor. He was helped into an ato-cab by a hard-featured girl who had followed

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him from the *Centaur*. She was certainly Roxy Ames, his niece. Other men from the ship entered the cab with them and they were driven off toward the city and a hotel while the crowd cheered the rising tide of Earth's empire.

There had been nothing like this occasion since, when I was a kid, the first interplanetary ship had come back with the truth that the canals of Mars really are strips of vegetation, still watered by machines whose creators are long extinct, and that there are wonderful ruins among the bizarre scrub-growths of Syrtis Major, that great blue-green triangle near the Martian equator.

Shouts went through the mob, conveying information already learned. "One in every three of the *Centaur's* crew is dead!"

"It's dangerous out there."

"Proxima Centauri has five planets. Three are too big and cold to be any good."

"But the other two are Earthlike. One is fifty-five hundred miles in diameter. The other—six thousand. Smaller than Earth but bigger than Mars."

"And they're close together. . . ."

Until then, Skip Hanlon had kept quite calm. Now a special eagerness seemed to take hold of him. His eyes narrowed. His knuckles, clutching the police barrier, whitened.

Through a covered and pressurized causeway that had been set up, specimens from another Solar System were being brought from the airlock of the *Centaur* into the depot.

Skip and I saw our first crawl-weed, still alive within its glass cage. And we smelled an indescribable muskiness—the taint of strange life left in alien atmospheres. This, even though to the farthest reaches of the universe oxygen and nitrogen are the same. Sometimes the latter fact is hard to realize.

We saw odd carven pebbles and many queer glinting things of metal, intricately made. Things that were not man's work nor the products of his needs. We saw strange animals, carefully mounted. There was more stuff than I could ever remember.

Skip managed to draw a *Centaur* crew member, who was helping to move the specimen cases, into a conversation. "Hey, friend," he said. "Just how close together are these two planets?"

The guy looked at him, annoyance on his tough face. "Real close," he growled. "Be sure to remember so you won't have to ask again."

The sly humor in Skip's face was combined with an intensity that was almost grim. "Uhunh," he grunted. "I kind of thought so. Twin or binary stars are common in the universe. So why not binary planets too? Worlds close together, revolving around each other—or rather around a common center of gravity, somewhere between them.

"Judging from their sizes this pair of Centaurian spheres would have about the same combined mass as that of the Earth and the Moon. But it's almost equally divided."

I'd never heard Skip Hanlon speak quite like this before. I got the idea that behind what he had said were years of unspoken thought.

The crewman's expression became truculent. "Huh!" he growled. "My shipmate's been talkin' too much! And against the Chief's orders. Newscast was supposed to get all important information first."

Skip looked startled at himself. Then he grinned. "Tell me something else, pal," he urged. "Northcross didn't name these two Centaurian planets Damon and Pythias, did he?"

SOMETHING happened then that was like the jingle of a slot-machine jackpot in some low Lunar dive—again. It wasn't audible, of course. It was the way I felt. Skip, taking a long chance and winning—guessing right. There was a glow to it, a pleasant and almost shocked wonder. As if Skip somehow had a private pipeline to the unknown. I could read the truth in that crewman's face.

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"Beat it, lug!" he snapped. "Go back to your fortune-telling!"

But my buddy grinned happily. "Thanks, fella," he said.

"Nope—I'm not psychic, Don," he told me a moment later. "Damon and Pythias. The pals that mortgaged their lives for each other's good faith—the classic symbols of friendship. When I guessed that Northcross so named these two planets it was only parallel reasoning. Those are logical names, aren't they?"

We boarded a tube-train to return to Copernicus City. "Do you want to hear some more logic, Don?" Skip asked me. "Even if, as one theory claims, all of the universe is the same age—thus denying a head-start to any world except on the basis of smaller size, hence swifter cooling and earlier development of life—still, on habitable twin worlds, scientific progress would be much more rapid than elsewhere. Out there on Damon and Pythias there must have arisen a civilization far beyond anything possible on a solitary planet. Don't ask why, Don. You'll see."

"Will I?" I asked with mild sarcasm.

"Sure, Don," Skip replied definitely. "Because Northcross will be heading back for those planets soon, won't he? It's only reasonable. I'd say that he'll start out within six weeks. And this time both you and I have *got* to be on the *Centaur!* Why—it'll be like making up a little for the hard luck that Earth's Moon never was a competent twin—for all of the lost might-have-beens of achievement!"

Yes, Skip Hanlon had been a casual easy-going vagabond. Now there was fire under his tail. One might say that he was trapped by Fate? Romance, yearning, the spell of mysteries made one driving force. But did I see the ghost of Alan Hanlon—Skip's twin, who who had died far short of manhood and fulfillment—smiling somewhere behind it all?

I'm made for adventure too. But now I have killed the charm of it fast. "Yeah," I growled. "With ten thousand other guys, all highly qualified in some field, begging to replace crew members who want to be replaced, *we* should be accepted. Is that logic?"

"You're a qualified engineer yourself," Skip said earnestly.

"And what'll you do—stow away?" I demanded.

I guess my question was brutal. It was like throwing all of Skip's improvident poetic years in his face. But there was a strange mingling of mildness and determination in his chuckle.

"That I'd try, Don," he told me, "if the hawkeyed guards of the *Centaur* didn't make stowing away impossible. But there are other alleys of approach. Priority of application for jobs sometimes means something. And we'll both send letters to Northcross within the hour. Who knows? Maybe I'll ship as the crew jester. Lend me two hundred bucks, Don."

Crazy guy—did it matter that, according to the newscast accounts, there were great deserts and small salty oceans on Damon and Pythias? That, against Skip's hope of a super-culture out there, there were just vast empty cities—well-preserved but uninhabited—and ruins doubtless millions of years older? Or that otherwise the rule of tooth and claw held sway—even though in an interesting fashion?

"I rather suspected all that, Don," was Skip's mild comment. "So it makes my beliefs stronger. I *thought* there'd be huge, ancient temples out there, half buried in the dust."

CHAPTER II

Takeoff

THAT pal of mine didn't stop with a letter of application to Northcross. He had another angle. He kissed his latest light of love good-by. She was

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a cute little trick from Frisco. Love is always a little brutal, I suppose. This tourist girl had to go home anyway.

With my dough Skip bought himself a natty coverall—the kind of glamorous but businesslike rig that spacemen in the chips wear during time off. And he hung around the Nine Planets, the best hotel in Copernicus City. There he played old tunes softly—almost to himself.

Sure—he was setting a trap. Why would a guy go after a hard-faced mannish girl like Gregg Northcross' niece, Roxy Ames, except for a materialistic motive? I'd never known Skip to be cold-blooded before.

"You make nice music."

I was present when at last Roxy Ames smiled at Skip, and offered this comment from halfway across the lobby. The funny thing was that then she didn't look hard-faced at all. Just young, blond, athletic and pretty. A little luxury had melted the strain of hair-trigger living out of her.

Skip got up, bowed and said, "Thank you, Miss."

I scrammed, unobtrusively. But it didn't help. When I saw Skip a couple of hours later at my small hotel, there was something desperate and sick in his eyes.

"Maybe I worked too fast, Don," he growled. "She's smart. She was amused. I was like a kid. My ace card is no good. What'll I do now, Don?"

"You got *me*, pal," I answered with sympathy.

I could imagine Roxy's gray eyes taking on a glint of ice and laughter—one that no wolf could meet without feeling silly. "Poor Skip."

Ten Earth-days later I got a letter. I had an interview with Northcross' right-hand man, Mel Peters. His doctor looked me over. When I left I had a paper saying that I was hired as a minerals expert for the second flight of the *Centaur* in about three weeks. Sheer dumb luck.

No—Skip didn't take to drink. I would have felt better if he had. He was burning out his brains for a way to get a berth on that star-globe. It was pathetic—almost as though part of his own soul would die if he couldn't go out to Proxima Centauri—and those twin planets. Here was the one thing that he had ever wanted to do with all his heart.

Sure, I would have given him my job—if he had been qualified to fill it and if Mel Peters had agreed. I even risked getting fired to talk to Peters about Skip.

Mel Peters shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry," he told me, "but we've even been hoping that more crew members would quit—so that they could be replaced by real experts. As it is there are many we'd like to sign up but can't find room for."

Skip had even thought of buying a job from a crewman. I would have lent him the money for this—probably. But of course it was obvious now no such transaction would be permitted.

Time grew short. Twelve hours before takeoff I met Skip at a bar in town. That was when I said something that had a little of the loyalty of the Damon and Pythias story in it—if it doesn't sound over-sentimental. Yeah—friendship that surpasseth brotherhood.

"I won't go, Skip," I told him. "Some time we'll blast out to Proxima Centauri together."

"Like hell you won't go, Don," he snapped at me. "Anyhow, I might still have a chance. So long. Better beat it now."

I don't believe in extended farewells either. As I left the bar I thought I recognized a guy at a corner table. Our old friend, the *Centaur* crewman that Skip had once talked to. He scowled at me.

I treated myself to an ato-cab ride to the spaceport. And also to the luxury of a hunch or—wishful thinking.

Ten minutes before takeoff time no wish had yet come true. Sounding through the ship's address system was Mel Peters' voice calling roll. It works

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because wherever you are on a ship like the *Centaur* there's always a microphone handy, through which you can answer, "Here, Sir!" It double-checks the signing-in sheet.

"... George Paxton.... Are you here, George Paxton?"

ALL Peters got for an answer was a rather incredible silence. The crew were picked men, unlikely to back out at the last moment, when replacements would be hard to make.

Yeah—for me it was like a cue. I went to the main airlock, which was still open. Sure enough—beyond the glass wall of the depot, pressed against the barrier cable with the crowd behind him, I saw a small hopeful man.

I went to the control room, where Peters was. "What's George Paxton's job, Mr. Peters?" I asked.

"Galley," he answered. "Why?"

"A lug I know is almost at the bottom of the gangplank," I replied. "He has had plenty of kitchen experience. And he doesn't have to say good-by to a soul."

Peters grinned tiredly. "Go get him, Ellis," he told me.

Things had been perfectly timed. Skip was a little stewed. He was elated, unbelieving and guilty all at the same moment. A white adhesive pad covered the knuckles of his left fist.

As we entered the *Centaur* he whispered to me, "Sorry, Don. But Paxton didn't *really* want a second trip anyway. Maybe I saved his life when I got him drunker. Who knows? He'll get a better paying job easy on an interplanetary ship. And he started the fight. Hitting him helped put him to sleep. I stuffed the ten dollars I had left into his pocket."

Uhunh—the excuses of guys who just take what they want. Skip probably spoke facts. It wasn't like him to do what he had done. But I could feel better remembering that the journey to Damon and Pythias meant a thousand times more to Skip than even the primal law of self-preservation.

Blasting off was much the same as on an ordinary spaceship. Bells clanging—orders—strapping one's self to his bunk—waiting for the first thrust-jolt of the atomic jets.

A few thousand miles out from the Moon, those marvelous new engines of the *Centaur* went to work and we swung into overdrive. Vision blurred. One felt impossibly but painlessly twisted. A vagueness, characteristic of hyperspace, lingered. And there was fear lest that intricate wonderful apparatus, still short of perfection, might fail entirely, ending our lives in an explosion of matter-energy shifts and phases that we would not feel or know about.

Or there might be a small fault of function—improper matching of transdimensional coordinates. It could be that when we came out of overdrive at last we would be changed to monsters. The *Centaur's* complicated engines needed constant fine adjustments.

They had been tried on one round trip to Proxima Centauri—not enough, really, to iron out their bugs. It would be years yet before the working of an overdrive system would be an effortless thing that one could sometimes forget about.

Yes, we on the *Centaur*, were traveling faster than light. At least that was the *practical* result. We were tearing out past the orbits of Mars, Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto—and on into the interstellar void.

But we were covering three-dimensional distance by a kind of bypass through a region where space had not quite the same properties, where time itself had a different rhythm. So how could one tack a simple familiar velocity figure to our strange rate of progression?

We had the first of our few meals served in hyperspace. Skip Hanlon was our waiter. Food looked and tasted more or less the same. Things remained recognizable—even though atomic structure and energy-patterns—in the food, the metal walls around us, in our own

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flesh and bones—had certainly shifted.

The vague shimmering was everywhere. Hazy—full of tiny sparks. Sounds were changed, too. Voices became thin and ringing. Yet what had happened remained wonderful even to those of us who had experienced it before.

Skip Hanlon threw a strange note into our thinking when he said, "If the Earth and Moon had been more nearly the same size ships like the *Centaur* would have been built on them many millions of years ago. Too bad, isn't it?"

THE scientists' ears picked up almost visibly. These people became suddenly interested, as if they knew what this galley scullion meant. Northcross, Peters, Kerr, Law, Peck and the others—yes, Roxy Ames, too. She was a biologist but she probably could have passed tests in a dozen other sciences, astrophysics included.

Skip's talk seemed to intrigue her a lot more than his harmonica-playing. A small frown came between her brows—very feminine and quizzical.

"Yes," she said. "I remember you. So you're comparing the history of Damon and Pythias with our own. So you're a deep thinker. With a little luck out there you might see the Shifters. But let that pass for now. What else can you say about the worlds we're going to visit? Facts that haven't been pointed out publicly, I mean."

Skip grinned. "Well, let's see. It's public knowledge that they keep the same hemispheres facing each other at all times, as they revolve around their common center of gravity. So their days are of identical length and coincide with their orbital period. About fifty hours, isn't it? Pardon me! That's announced fact, too. . . .

"But I can also say that with many thousands of miles of empty space between them these twin worlds nevertheless now have much the same plant and animal life. And that their facing hemispheres have most of the remaining seas, and the richest vegetation. Tidal attraction would draw the moisture . . ."

Skip must have risen in his listeners' eyes. He sounded like one of them. But Roxy Ames kept a teasing tone when she asked, "What are you going to do on Damon and Pythias?"

Skip was quick and blithe in his reply. "Learn things. Maybe try to even the score of the Moon's failure. Catch up a little. Write a book. Who knows?"

Then he went to bring in the coffee.

Maybe Roxy Ames and the others saw something funny about his being on the *Centaur*—with barked knuckles and replacing George Paxton, so strangely absent. But maybe during that vast journey they all learned to think better of him. He and his mouth-organ belonged on that star-globe—and his old tunes, that took on a crystalline quality in hyperspace.

We spent most of that trip dozing in our bunks. Hyperspace dulls the mind. Everyone knows that now. And old time-scales just don't apply. Earth-time our journey took many months. But it didn't seem anywhere near that long.

We snapped out of overdrive with the same impossibly twisted sensation that we had felt on entering it. In my bunk, I took stock of myself, grateful to remain Don Ellis—not a warped shape.

I heard a protracted clicking, deep in the star-globe. It meant another irregularity of the overdrive engines. Probably worse than usual—but I guess it didn't scare anybody, not even those who saw wires burn up in the overload of power that had drawn us back to normal space, in the fire that flashed through great crystals.

In a planetary or stellar ship you learn to take what comes and believe in your own powers. We'd fix those engines. Just now there were more interesting matters to be concerned with.

I started for Skip Hanlon's quarters—in the glory-hole with the lesser crew members. But he met me more than halfway.

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"Topside," I said.

Standing under the metal-ribbed transparent roof we got our first look at two gigantic opals, in which rusty browns and soft blues and greens, mixed in strange streaks and swirls. They made odd patterns through the blur of atmosphere in which a few cloud-patches floated—especially around the white spots at the poles.

Damon and Pythias! I thought partly of Earth's empire expanding to the stars. Colonies—new products—new sources of supply.

Skip just stared enraptured—as if here, in these two middle-aged planets, shining under another sun, Proxima Centauri, there was compensation somehow for both the death of his own twin and that of the Earth's twin. He saw the latter as a loss to mankind. But here there was almost another different path of probability.

Roxy Ames was the next person to arrive topside. She spoke at Skip's elbow, her voice husky. "Kerr came out of overdrive with a twisted chest. Maybe because the engines burned. He didn't have a normal heart anymore. He's dead!"

I heard the words but they didn't register. For Skip and I still stared entranced at those two planets.

"You aren't even decent enough to listen!" Roxy snapped.

Skip gasped and turned toward the girl. "Sorry," he stammered. "Yes, I listened, Miss Ames. Only—well—poor Kerr!"

I had my shock and surprise to express, too. Does it matter what I said? Kerr was one of us—our recorder. But words have a way of sounding phony. Still, if the first trip to Proxima Centauri meant anything some of us had to die this time too. It was a chance taken. Grief had to be short. Interest and learning went on. Maybe the worst Kerr's death meant was that trouble had begun for us.

We buried Kerr in space before we landed on Damon, the smaller of the binary planets, the one which had received the less attention during the first journey of the *Centaur*.

CHAPTER III

Robot Life

BIG Greg Northcross made the funeral oration brief. His scratchy voice softened at the end. "So long, Kerr," he said.

Minutes later our retard-jets—simple atomic rockets, not our overdrive engines—were checking our fall toward Damon.

We landed at the dawn-fringe of the planet, which was half like Mars, half like Earth. Bigger than one and less harsh—smaller and not as verdant as the other. The east was paling from starshot black toward the ultramarine which is the normal shade of the skies of both Damon and Pythias during daylight. For the air of both is thin and, held down by a gravity but little more than half that of Earth, rather highly expanded. So the skies look like Earthly skies as seen from a high altitude.

"We could puff our way around in this atmosphere without space suits and oxygen helmets," Northcross said to me as we stepped down to the hard-baked ground. "But for other reasons we've put them on. How do you like it here, Ellis?"

"So far, so good," I replied through my helmet-radio. Northcross chuckled.

It was still almost night—but an unEarthly glorious night. The mossy plain was frost-covered. There were low eroded mountains in one direction. There were scattered groves of what might have been trees, illuminated by something like moonlight though far stronger. Gusts of breeze stirred up little plumes of dust. Far off, a dark patchwork crept slowly but visibly over the ground.

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Shadows, they might have been, except that there was nothing to cast them. Two small shapes, more rigid and streamlined than birds, darted overhead and disappeared. Through the thin substance of my helmet I heard a distant yowling. It faded out. But from the direction of the dark moving patches came a steady whispering.

"A colony of crawl-weeds," Northcross explained briefly.

Skip Hanlon was at my elbow. "Look," he said.

Our gaze swung to the gigantic broad crescent in the east. Pythias—its shrunken oceans were blue-green. They reflected spots of sunlight brilliantly. There was no mistaking the white cloud patches. The greener blurs of vegetation identified themselves easily on that great globe. Some markings looked geometric and artificial. And there were obvious rivers and mountain chains.

Skip laughed softly with great satisfaction. "This is what I meant most," he said as if he had already spoken. "Think back millions of years to an era on Damon equivalent to that of the earliest cavemen on Earth. The half-intelligent beings here looked up at Pythias. And perhaps before they had discovered fire they knew truths about worlds and the universe that men missed for ages.

"At a glance they must have recognized a planet like their own—green and inhabited and intriguing. Of course there was still superstition. Still, they had this wonderful head-start in science. And what an urge to achieve space-travel! Gosh—if only we—"

Skip stopped as if ashamed of raving. There was a moment of silence. Roxy looked at me quizzically. Then Northcross said, "Perhaps you belong in Kerr's job and quarters, Hanlon. You will take notes on all our investigations here."

Sure Skip was startled. He must have hoped that it would be like this. He was of the elite now, our new recorder. I was glad.

The sun rose. Twenty-five hours each of daylight and darkness are hard for Earthfolk to adjust to at first. Right after breakfast we began to prepare for our explorations.

We unloaded our three small planes from the *Centaur* and our light tractors. We had excavating equipment, everything that people interested in fossils and relics and their preservation need. We had powerful weapons and the knowledge, from the first coming of the *Centaur* to this region, that it was unwise to wander off alone.

We flew that day over low mountains, forests, deserts, sprawling ruins and empty cities. We walked on lonely beaches, crusted with salt. We investigated a colony of crawl-weeds. They roll over flat ground, moved by the wind, like tumbleweeds. Thus they migrate, following uncertain water. But they are sluggishly mobile in their own right.

Northcross emerged from the moving colony, not a man in space-armor anymore but a shaggy dark-green giant, for crawl-weeds covered him entirely. He laughed and plucked them free. They had no true leaves. Each was a system of pulpy branches and roots, radiating from a center and equipped with little hooks and suckers.

"They're on Pythias, too," Northcross said. "But a lot of things are common to both worlds. Ancient space-travel was responsible. The accidental and intentional transfer of life-forms on spacecraft from one world to the other."

WE saw some of those other forms that day. A little plume of smoke, arising from a low broad mound like an anthill, meant something. Skip had a comment.

"What corresponds to ants here have learned the use of fire," he chuckled. "Evolution is older. Minds have advanced further—naturally. Still, a dominant race might have experimented on the lower orders, improving them for use or for research. On these binary

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planets the dominant race progressed faster—and then passed the progress-impulse on—like a chain-reaction."

We also saw great tracks—in soft mud near a water-hole. We saw the ashes of a fire and the putrid offal of a feast. The tracks were a little like those of a great cat.

"By now it has seen us," Roxy said. "Keep low, everybody."

Skip grinned with pleasure as we all ducked down and crept away quietly. I didn't know what this was all about but the faces of those who had visited these worlds before were grim and sweaty.

There came a soft whir. I turned to see the tip of a great boulder turn incandescent and drool molten rock. From far off I heard a long-drawn angry wail of defiance. My hide puckered.

Nobody said a word till we got back to our guarded planes.

"Something like a tiger," Skip chuckled. "It fits the pattern, doesn't it, Roxy? Damon, being a little smaller than Pythias, must have been the cradle of life out here. Under forces which I have already mentioned animals have attained the brain-power of primitive men. And couldn't they find or steal real scientific weapons from what used to be the ruling race? Maybe still is?"

Skip sounded as if he were teasing Roxy. But she teased in return. "Could be," she said.

For one long day we had had enough. We flew back to the *Centaur*.

Death and danger kept close to us during all of our six months on Damon. We kept busy with our investigations. Skip Hanlon recorded everything in detail. I'll hit only the high spots.

First the cities—all dead and empty of their first inhabitants.

"That's queer, isn't it, Skip?" I said quite a few times. "Considering your theory of a super-civilization?"

"It works out just right, Don," he would answer.

Some of those cities were just mounds that went countless ages back. We dug into a few, finding pottery shards.

There were the far more recent stone cities—ruined, of course. In the midst of each was a great circular edifice. You could actually see similar cities, scraggy rectangles on the face of Pythias across space.

But it was in those stone cities on Damon that we saw the earliest bas-reliefs of the inhabitants. They were bipedal-like men. They had lumpy flesh. Flecks of brown paint still clung to those slim strange figures.

In relation to these metropoli of the Middle Period—they were neither the oldest nor the newest—I remember one Pythias-lit night particularly. A half-dozen of us were walking through a shadowy hall of the central edifice of one of these cities.

Around our feet was a squirming carpet of insect-like things that would have gleefully eaten us alive if we hadn't been wearing space-armor. I heard the rustle of their bodies and a steady chirping that sounded like a chant. They were clustered thickest around what might have been an age-old altar.

"I wonder," Skip said musingly. "Primitive minds need simple gods. It's a phase of their development. And always there was Pythias hanging in the sky. An awesome thing. And here is a discarded temple. I wonder if even the bugs are following the path of the first inhabitants? I wonder if all the animals, advancing mentally, are a little like this! Ellis! Look *out!*"

It was the first time that Skip had called me Ellis. But it hardly meant stuffiness to me just then, as through a broken rift in the wall, that showed brilliant Pythian light on broken columns, I saw a lithe furry shape move. I threw myself prone among the writhing insectiform creatures.

Then there was a flash of incandescence where I had just been. Drops of liquid stone blazed momentarily like burning magnesium. Two human bodies were limned against the glare, parts of them vanishing in spurts of fire.

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THE effects of the atomic bullet from Northcross' pistol was almost a duplicate of the first flash except for a roar of sound. A great chunk was torn from the back of the creature that had attacked us. As the echoes of the crash faded its remains lay still.

We approached it cautiously, mindful of possible radiation burns from the products of the bullet's explosion. The frosty breeze rumpled its soft fur. Yes, it was a little like a tiger. But its calloused forepaws could open up almost like hands.

Over its natural claws were clamped great crudely-made hooks of steel, razor-sharp. Beside the stripeless dun-colored carcass lay a tube, far too intricate ever to have been fashioned in the simple forges which these creatures seemed to possess. The weapon had been found or stolen.

Bach and Rose were dead. And there had already been three others, including Kerr. Two had fallen prey to darters. In flight they resembled birds. But their vanelike wings were of chitin like the shells of beetles. Their long beaks were poisoned. And they seemed to know that a space-suit could be pierced at the soft rubberized joints.

All life on this savage planet seemed to resent and fear our presence. Skip's super-civilization seemed a myth of the far past.

Already we had seen some of the Late Period cities. And we were destined to see much more of them. Maybe they were only a hundred thousand years old. It seemed that they had been abandoned in careful order. Doors were locked. Nothing was damaged.

Glassy ground, fused once by atomic heat—perhaps, as Skip said, during the wars between two worlds—had been covered with newer buildings. So war perhaps had been discarded. It had been part of a phase too.

We saw the space-ship quays in those cities—and the gigantic thought-machines—and a mingling of two similar types of skeletons. According to Roxy Ames, the Pythians differed from the Damonites chiefly in a stronger bone-structure, adapted to the slightly stronger gravity of their native planet.

Among beautiful art-objects and things of alien luxury were the robots. Millions—of all shapes and forms. Some were quasi-human. Most of them rested in orderly fashion in the cabinets where they belonged when not in use. Some lay in apartments and shops. But a few lay bright and unrusted in streets and weed-grown courtyards.

Skip Hanlon had always been fascinated by everything on Damon. But for several days he went fairly wild about those robots.

"Maybe this is catching-up time for Earthians, Ellis," he said once. "For the scientific advancement we should have by now. Much of it is in these machines."

Sure—here was the core of his old regret and of the answering drives in him. The failure of the Moon to be an honest twin to Terra—and the compensation.

Of course we couldn't help but learn by studying these robots. Facts useful to man's extension of dominance out into the universe. Maybe at first Skip actually thought of bridging lost ages of time in one jump. By long thinking he had reasoned out much that had proved true. Yet at a point he turned too cocky and naive.

Part of the answer to that lay in the gently amused and knowing looks that Roxy Ames gave him. Do I have to say that they were sweet on each other and were constant companions?

But a better answer was in those robots themselves. We tried to re-energize a few. Well, take a human corpse—try to bring it back to life—try even to understand how it once functioned.

Yes, you can get quite a way in the latter job. Its heart pumped blood. Its brain and nerves were like a relay-system. You can even approach the secret of life. But somewhere the intricacy gets beyond what you can follow in a hundred quick steps.

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It takes time. Centuries—maybe ages of testing and studying. It was the same with those robots. Maybe it's good that no race can get too much of a gift without working for it. I guess you've got to be humble.

SKIP looked angry and frustrated. He and Greg Northcross and Roxy Ames went deep into the subject of those dead robots. And beyond—to the Shifters. Moving planes of light, they were supposed to be.

I missed out on much of this because I was busy with my simpler specialty—minerals. Thinking some of mine-colonies that might be established out here by humans in the more-or-less near future. Thinking of empire, of vastly broadened terrestrian horizons.

But my work and dreaming were lonesome. During the first month on Damon I used to hear Skip's mouth-organ around the *Centaur* in the morning. Then I didn't hear it anymore.

Trail-blazing is always full of trouble and we had plenty. For one thing it's hard to keep guys in space-armor when they know that they can breathe native air. There was an argument once that no diseases on an alien planet could affect man—that it would be as ridiculous as the idea of a turtle catching mumps from a human child.

This is okay as far as it goes. But there is another angle. The flesh of man seems to sense strangeness by an intelligence and worry of its own and to revolt against it. Against the juices and odors and pollens of un-Earthly plants. The result is—allergy.

Some of our bunch on their first trip in the *Centaur*—scientists who should have known better—shed their space-armor in secret afield. The next day their faces were so swollen and red that they could scarcely see. Ulceration soon followed. Death was possible.

But allergies were a minor misfortune. Real catastrophe came one night aboard ship, where we thought we were entirely safe.

Roxy Ames had typed up copies of a paper that Skip Hanlon had written. I would have preferred to hear Skip tell me what was in it. But he, the ex-vagabond, was pretty busy these days. So I had taken a copy to bed with me. I was skimming through it:

> Intelligent beings seek always to shorten their limitations. For instance, medical science fights disease and struggles to conquer the limitation of death. Here we theorize beyond our actual learning, and perhaps beyond our mental development, as well. It may be that our advanced being succeeds at last in making his own flesh more or less immortal by rejuvenation. But it remains sensitive to heat and cold. Without machines, it is tied to the ground.
>
> But can a living personality be transferred to a mechanical device? Can it assume an electronic brain and a metal body far more rugged and free?
>
> And is another step, which has often been suggested, also possible? That is an ego that becomes pure energy? One that is free from need, free in the whole universe and can do as it wishes, even to taking on mortal shape again for a while?
>
> Have these things happened here in succession, explaining both the empty cities and the discarded robots?
>
> Twice, in City B, I have seen the so-called Shifters. They look like an aurora but cling close to the ground.

Well, I Don Ellis, didn't read any further. I was getting goose-pimples. Skip couldn't be blamed for sounding a little pedantic. After all, words had to be found to express his subject.

The real reason why I threw the paper down was the unsteady shuffling of feet and the muttered exclamations and curses outside my quarters. It sounded ominous.

CHAPTER IV

The Parasites

WHEN I opened the door a man named Peck was leaning against the passage wall. He grunted and slumped to the deck. "In my heel," he managed to wheeze.

I pressed the button of an alarm bell.

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Then I examined the whitened sting on the back of Peck's foot. Others of our number came. Northcross shouted for antivenin. But doc was on his way to get it. Skip was slashing the little wound with a pocket knife.

"What got you, Peck?" Skip demanded.

"I—don't—know . . ." They were the last words Peck ever spoke.

Soon we found that four other people were similarly afflicted—in various parts of the *Centaur*.

"Maybe your Shifters did it, Skip," I suggested.

He looked up at me from the corpse he was then bending over. He spoke to me coldly, like a harassed superior.

"Does that make sense, Ellis? No, this is the result of primitive fear and vindictiveness. Something savagely shrewd, not big enough to be easily noticed, got into the ship. Stay on guard, everybody."

Northcross shouted over the *Centaur's* announcer-system, "Danger aboard ship! All hands don space-armor!"

It was good advice, advice which could be carried out quickly. But disaster could be quicker. In the next thirty seconds, before space-suits could be donned, thirty of our company were stricken.

Including Greg Northcross. Roxy Ames, Peters, Skip and I were all present when it happened in the *Centaur's* dining saloon, where we had found one of the first bodies. We saw only that Northcross gripped the back of his thigh. Even as Roxy pumped antivenin into his blood he died.

"Everybody out of the ship—armored or not!" Skip yelled into the announcer. "The injured too!"

Fast though we were we had a few more casualties. Roxy, Skip, Peters, the doc and I had all been too busy even to try to don armor. We went out, panting, into a gorgeous frosty night.

Skip borrowed a space-suit. "There's one way to handle this business," he growled, before he closed his face-plate. "Cyanogen. Keep working with the antivenin."

He re-entered the *Centaur*. In stores there was cyanogen for fumigation purposes. Deadly stuff—put it into the ventilator system—close the exit airlocks from the outside.

Skip Hanlon came back to us. We gave the stuff an hour to work. Then Skip returned to set the ventilator pumps so that they would clear the poisoned air out of the ship and replace it with compressed Damonite atmosphere, carefully filtered and purified.

By then all of our casualties had perished.

We all re-entered the star-globe to search for what was left of our unknown enemies.

Roxy discovered the first of their forms. Fourteen we located. There were probably others, hidden in inaccessible places.

Roxy picked the body up just inside the main airlock. She held it in a space-glove—she had donned armor by now. Her eyes were still misted because her uncle and the others were gone. Her small strong jaw was set. But as she looked at the tiny furry creature in her hand I almost thought I saw compassion mixed with her surprise.

The creature had pink translucent ears. Its cranium bulged. Its dead eyes were like red beads—fierce.

Roxy opened her face-window. "It almost resembles a mouse," she mused.

Skip Hanlon stooped. When he straightened he held two minute objects—a kind of steel crossbow, cleverly but roughly made, and a box of woven fibre, which he handled carefully. Under its flap were deadly darts.

"A kind of creature that we never noticed before," Skip said. "But probably numerous. I'll bet that this fella and his bunch got into the ship in a load of specimens. I suppose that, with so many forms of intelligent life in fierce competition here, it's natural to mistrust and to try to destroy anything strange—such as us."

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We let it go at that. But I thought of men experimenting with mice, of other beings perhaps helping natural evolution at some time, to give these little animals the wits of human savages.

After our catastrophe no luck seemed to be good. There were nineteen of us left. Some of us were already afflicted with the scarring sores of allergies. And soon after the exposure of more of us to the raw air of Damon it was worse. I got a light rash on my hands. Roxy was lucky too. But Peters, Skip, doc and a couple of others were a mess. The morale was pretty well kicked out of us.

Not that we felt done with Damon and Pythias or with the deeper universe, where man-made star-globes would one day be common. Freshened up we could come back for more. But if we stayed on out here—well, it was easy to see that we'd all be dead at no distant date. The last few wouldn't even be buried.

Peck and a couple of others—our overdrive experts—were under the sod of Damon. And they hadn't got too far with the repair of our disabled engines. Sure—I love life myself. But some of us didn't give a damn anymore. We had our atomic jets—but how could they bridge interstellar distance in less than a dozen lifetimes?

PHYSICALLY I don't think Skip Hanlon cared very much for life either. He was too sick. But he was still pursuing some pattern of fulfillment with a crazy tenacity. Of course he was in love too.

One evening a plane roared away from the *Centaur* with Skip. He left a note. Roxy showed it to me:

Darling—This is a one-man job. I'll be back when I can be. Like I used to say, maybe the Earth and moon should have been real twins. And maybe we'll make up for a little of that, yet. Don't follow or let anyone else follow. It could spoil things. This is an order—if I have won a right to give commands. I love you. Dave.

Roxy's face was touched with hardness again. But her gray eyes were very soft.

"He's easy to track down with radar, Don," she said. "Even if we couldn't guess where he has gone. To keep within a few miles of him would be best—in spite of what he says. Peters agrees. So you and I will take another plane. Okay?" I nodded.

Roxy Ames and I flew to the city designated as B on our maps. We found Skip's plane grounded near its outskirts. We landed beside it and waited there, within sight of a thousand varicolored ceramic towers. We waited a day and a night—the equivalent of two Earth-days. We didn't dare go further into the city, where we might interrupt something vitally important—if that wasn't silly in more than one way.

Skip came back at last, on foot, with a heavy rucksack over the shoulders of his space-suit. He looked terrible. It was more than the scabs of allergies on his cheeks. It was his tiredness. Yet he managed to move quickly.

"One of you could fly me back to the *Centaur* in my plane," he said. "Okay, Roxy? No—don't apologize. It's just as well that you both came."

"Darling—are you all right?" Roxy asked, worried. "Just what did you do in the city?"

"I'm fine," he answered. "In the city I kept asking a favor mentally. Come on—let's get started."

It wasn't till we re-entered the *Centaur* and moved through a section of passage where lights were dim that I noticed that Skip's body gave off a lavender glow—the color of those moving planes of light that I myself had never seen—the Shifters.

Roxy paled. "Maybe it's not Dave at all, Don," she whispered fearfully to me. "Maybe it's just an energy-image that they make us see—for treachery. Dave could be dead!"

But we followed him to the *Centaur's* engine rooms. "Here's where you two give me a hand," he told us.

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I have never worked so efficiently before or since. Verbal orders were unnecessary. Three pairs of hands labored faultlessly.

And I know that mine weren't my own just then. I wasn't commanding them. Besides, from finger-tips to elbows my arms glowed. Ditto for Roxy's arms—just as for Skip's whole body.

Others of the *Centaur's* company came to watch us. They asked questions but we hardly listened. We tore those damaged overdrive engines apart. The minds guiding our fingers seemed to regard much of their complex components as scrap—to be replaced by simpler yet more incomprehensible apparatus from Skip's rucksack. Stuff from City B.

"Skip—why do they bother to help us?" I asked once.

"On Earth, when you ask directions from strangers they don't often tell you to go to hell," he answered. "Helping is no trouble, is it? They lose nothing. And they're not afraid. Besides, helping is the civilized way. It's as simple as that."

As I worked I had dreams. Distances were immense and beautiful. Variety was everywhere. I could be human if I wanted to be. I could be anything. I could go anywhere.

Sure. These were lesser fragments of the thoughts of other entities, intruding into my brain.

Skip said, as if he had visions too, "Of course Earthmen will find many cultures out among the stars. Lots of times the going will be rough and bloody. But I'm glad we'll have to progress mostly at our own rate.

"Perfection would be a little tiring, wouldn't it? We weren't born on a pair of more-or-less equal worlds. But we got plenty out of this trip—maybe a better understanding. And we'll reach other stars sooner and easier."

It sounded like a real answer for the yearning and regretful drives that had been troubling him—maybe even the loss of his own twin was compensated for.

"The engines will work now, Ellis," Skip said at last.

THEN he passed out. I almost did too. The strain on our nerves, while under the guidance of entities far more rugged than ourselves, had been terrific. And Skip was sick. His scabby face was waxy as he lay there on the deck.

Roxy looked wan. As she knelt down and pulled Skip's head into her lap—we were out of space-suits now—she began to cry. But she still knew what to do.

"Get the *Centaur* started, Don," she said. "Will some of you folks give me a lift with Dave?"

I knew Skip might die. Hard philosophy answered that for me. Other guys had taken a chance and had died, too.

Mel Peters ordered the planes and other gear outside stowed. Soon we jetted into space. Soon I pressed a little lever. Our shift to overdrive was a lot smoother this time.

Skip pulled through. Maybe that's minor history, now. But while we were journeying across interstellar distance, even after we reached the Moon, something kept bothering me. I'm not maudlin. It wasn't much really. I'd shrug about it and chuckle and feel glad. Then I'd feel sort of sad. It was a mood.

Mr. and Mrs. David Hanlon went to Earth on a lecture tour. Yeah—Roxy and Skip. I ran into some buddies and stayed on the Moon.

But a hundred hours ago, the Hanlons arrived back on Luna. Before that happened I saw some posters around Copernicus City.

THE SECOND INTERSTELLAR EXPEDITION
LECTURE SUBJECT FOR
PROFESSOR DAVID M. HANLON
AT
SPACEMEN'S CLUB
9:30—SECOND WATCH
LUNAR TIME

On Earth Mr. David Hanlon had picked up some honorary degrees. There was nothing wrong with that certainly.

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But right then the idea that had been bothering me hit me hard. My pal, Skip Hanlon, the easy-going likeable failure with the mouth organ and the whimsical viewpoint, was *really* dead.

I had seen him passing out of existence gradually for a long time. The bitter part was that this had happened by the process of his achieving what he wanted, by his getting the restless sadness out of him. It was life. It was a question of identity. Like the Shifters of Damon and Pythias—demigods of energy improved from robots, which in turn had been improved from beings of flesh and blood. In the improvement had there also been a loss?

SKIP HANLON was nowhere in the universe anymore—except in memory. He had changed so much that he could not be the same. Professor David M. Hanlon was a different harder soul. Of course you've got to be hard when you aim at the stars. Sometimes you have to step down on people to get what you want.

The title of Professor sounded stuffy. I wondered if I should put the responsibility for its use on David Hanlon. Maybe not. Perhaps because folks like to be impressed. They like a certain pomposity. So it was life again—and not necessarily the desire to be important. Still, there was a faint lump in my throat.

I went to that lecture. But first I visited the room where the speaker and his wife were waiting. It was a duty call.

"You saw everything I'm going to talk about first-hand, Don," Skip chuckled. "Want to be bored to death? Why don't you wait till the show is over and we can sneak off and get some beer? And maybe talk over the next expedition—to a farther star?" An allergy-scar on his cheek crinkled as he winked.

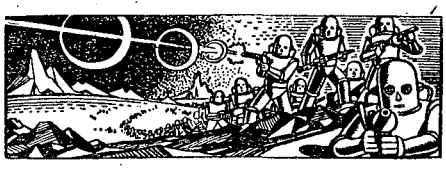
"I'll live through the lecture too, Skip," I said.

He shrugged apologetically, and pulled his harmonica from a pocket. He blew a chord softly.

"By the way, Don," he said "I found George Paxton here in Copernicus City before Roxy and I went to Earth. You know—the guy I swiped the galley job from. He was fresh in from Mars and flush. He was glad he didn't go again on the *Centaur*—especially when he heard how many of us got back. I offered him my salary. But he said 'Let's play poker for it instead.' He lost."

I might have known that deep down Skip would never change. And if he ever got too cocky I guess Roxy would put him straight. She laughed and said something that was in my mind too.

"There's a universe ahead, boys. Millions of suns—worlds single and double—demigods of energy. Maybe Earth-people will be like them someday—but I hope they'll always keep the part of themselves that's human."



Next Issue's Science Fiction Headliners!

THE CONTINENT MAKERS, a Novel by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

THE VOID BEYOND, a Novelet by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

MILORDS METHUSELAH, a SPRAGUE Novelet by CARTER

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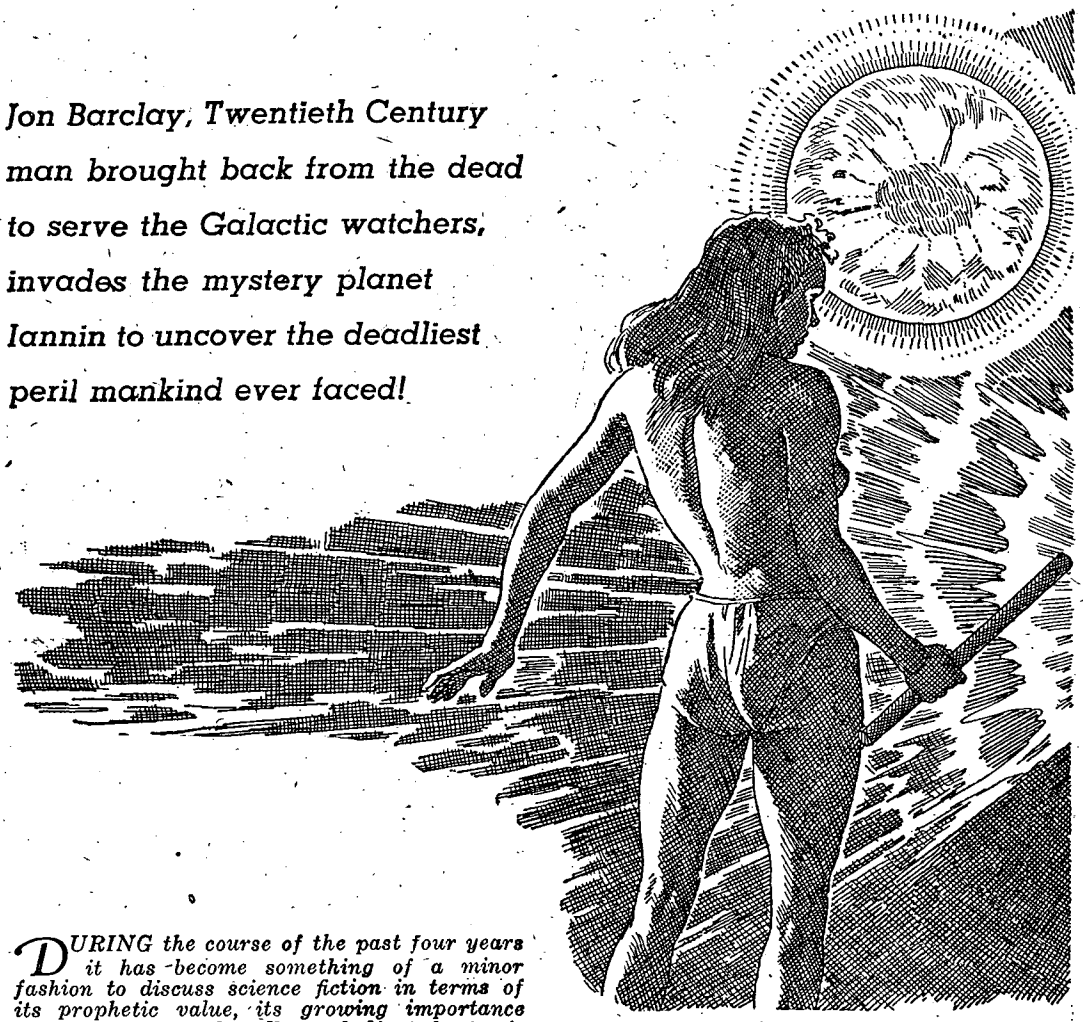
I, the UN-MORTAL

Jon Barclay, Twentieth Century man brought back from the dead to serve the Galactic watchers, invades the mystery planet Iannin to uncover the deadliest peril mankind ever faced!



DURING the course of the past four years it has become something of a minor fashion to discuss science fiction in terms of its prophetic value, its growing importance in a raw-new and sadly maladjusted atomic era, its ability to open the floodgates of sorely-needed human creative imagination. More briefly, it is increasingly discussed as "significant"—whatever that is.

However, once in awhile a story still crosses our desk that is about as significant as a blow-up in a fireworks factory—and just about as exciting, explosive and unexpected. Such a story is part of the basic fabric of science fiction upon which the more complex patterns of the present have been woven.

In short, it is space opera, and if neither entirely pure nor exactly simple, it provides a rousing rocketry display. Old timers among you will recognize and, we hope, welcome it for what it is. And newcomers will have a chance to discover the very warp and woof of the field. With which we suggest you get on with the story before it goes blasting utterly out of reach in some far galactic cranny!

—THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I

Rim of the Galaxy

I WASN'T alive. Not in any biological sense, at least. However, it didn't bother me. I can truthfully say that I scarcely ever gave it a thought.

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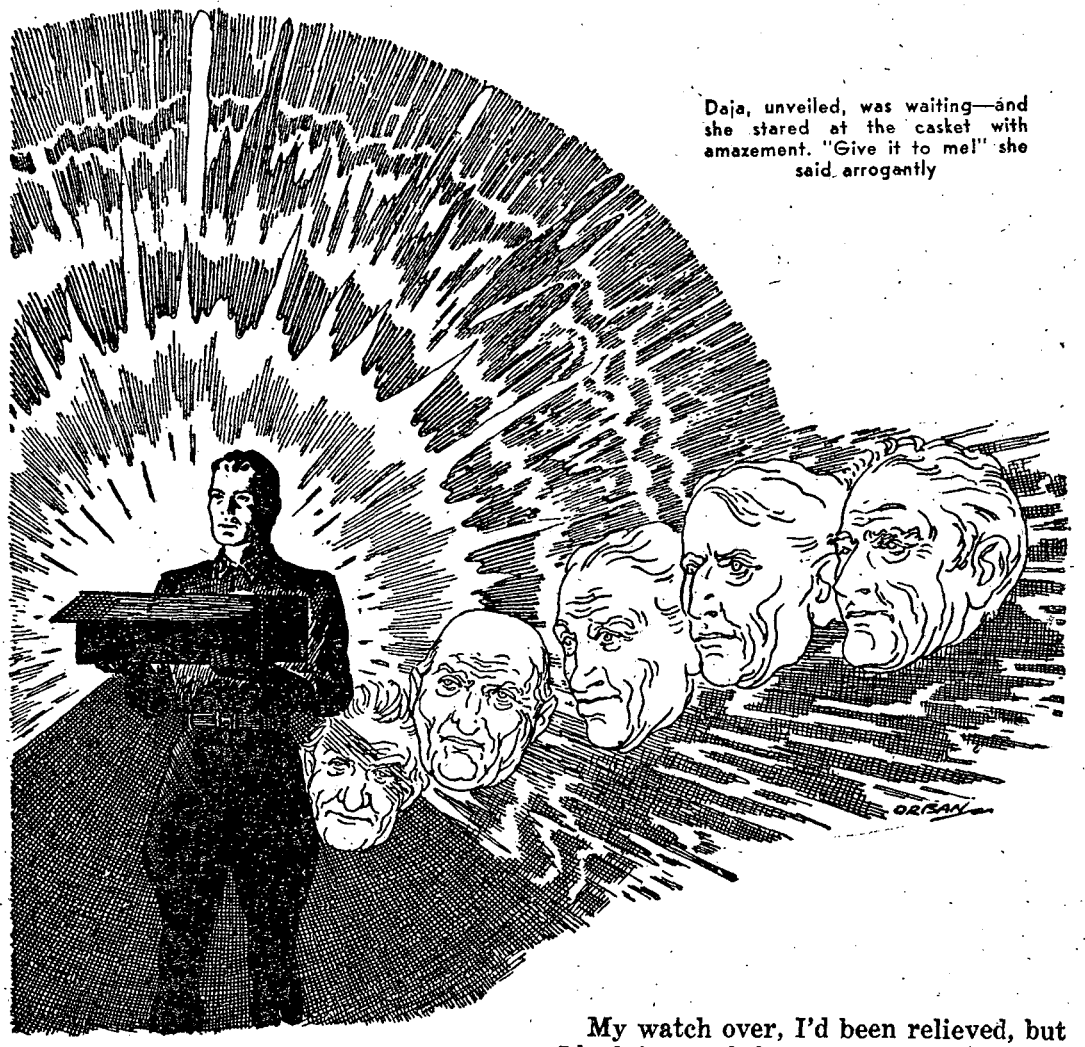
a short novel by EMMETT McDOWELL



Daja, unveiled, was waiting—and she stared at the casket with amazement. "Give it to me!" she said arrogantly

On the other hand I don't want to leave the impression that I was some disembodied spirit conjured up by the Watchers. There was nothing supernatural about my origin. Neither was I a machine such as the ingenious robots then in use. I wasn't even matter, I suppose, though I'm still somewhat doubtful on this point. My name was Jon.

Mister Jon Barclay, third navigator of the Argus—a dilapidated tramp spacer plying the Eldridge Cluster.

My watch over, I'd been relieved, but I hadn't gone below. I was standing near the control blister's transparent rind, staring at the void outside. While this wasn't my first voyage to the outer Galaxy, I'd never seen anything quite like it before.

Not a star was visible anywhere! Just solid smothering blackness as if the spacer were hurtling through an Earthly fog on a moonless night. We were three days into the uncharted depths of the black nebula. It gave me cold shivers to think of the Argus shooting blind

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through the huge cosmic dust cloud—a cloud big enough to swallow a dozen star systems.

I was scared. Which just goes to show how powerful habit patterns can be. I wasn't alive and so couldn't very well die. Of the entire crew I was the only one who had nothing to fear.

This of course was my peculiar value to the Watchers. Those five old men could send me to any spot in the incredible reaches of the Galactic Federation where trouble seemed to be developing, and so gain first-hand knowledge of the situation.

TO put it bluntly I was a spy, though without any more volition in the matter than a telescope in somebody's hand.

Whispers, I knew, had reached the Watchers from the Eldridge Cluster, rumors that something big was brewing in B831—a great uncharted dark nebula on the Galaxy's rim. The whispers all centered around the Eldridge Transport Company. I'd been dispatched to Ondaga where the Watchers had seen to it that I'd secured a berth aboard the Argus—one of Eldridge Transport's fleet of spacers.

No one suspected that I wasn't an ordinary spaceman, but so far I hadn't been able to learn anything. I don't mean that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Far from it.

On the eighth day out from Ondaga the captain had abruptly ordered the course changed and we had headed directly for the dark nebula. The captain was a taciturn unfriendly woman, whose conversation consisted chiefly of grunts. She didn't offer any explanations.

Then there were the other women. Mixed crews were general—but Mar Kurbi, the Chief Technician, and I were the only men aboard.

And what women! They kept to themselves, seeming to regard Kurbi and me as if we might contaminate them. They spoke some language among themselves which we couldn't understand and wore thin hammered gold masks all the time.

Since there must be tens of thousands of races scattered throughout the galaxy, each with its own peculiar customs and dress, I'd put them down as outlanders. I wouldn't have given them another thought if they hadn't been so secretive.

Not to mention those damned masks.

The first day out I'd walked into the ward room and found Miss Danyl, the Chief Navigator, with her mask off. She'd flushed scarlet, clapped her hands over her face and ordered me out in a flustered voice as if I'd burst in on her while she was taking a bath. Ever since then she had regarded me with obvious distaste as if I were a Peeping Tom.

I shouldn't have minded. Women couldn't mean anything to me. I mean I wasn't alive—but somehow that didn't seem to make any difference. Things like that made me wish I understood my own nature a little better.

Miss Danyl was on watch now, having relieved me in the control blister. She was bending over the radactor screen—a slight figure in her black-and-gold uniform. I couldn't see her face, hidden as it was by the gold mask, but I remembered it well enough from the one glimpse I'd caught of it.

She had rather daintily molded features, a delicate oval face and didn't look as if she could be a day over sixteen. All except her eyes, which were chilly, greenish yellow and altogether too wise.

I heard her give a sudden sharp exclamation.

"What is it?" I asked.

She looked up, her eyes appearing to glitter behind the slits in the mask.

"Something's registering on the radactor screen," she said in a tone of annoyance mixed with a certain faint contempt that always made me want to take a cane to her shapely bottom.

I strode across the deck, bent over the screen. But only an indistinct froth of light flickered uncertainly in its depths. Whatever it might be was still too far ahead of us to be identifiable.

"It could be a dead sun," I suggested, feeling an inexplicable coldness in the pit of my stomach.

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Miss Danyl silently made an entry in the log.

"Think we'd better notify Captain Lucinda?" I asked.

She gave me a level unfriendly stare. "You've been relieved, Mr. Barclay," she said dryly. "There is no reason for you to remain up here!"

I swore under my breath and went below. As I climbed down the ladder I saw her dial Captain Lucinda on the intervisor. Then she began to talk rapidly in that jargon the women used among themselves.

I might as well have been a passenger!

MAR KURBI was in the officer's mess, drinking Kalone, the Aldebaran stimulant. He waved me to a seat, filled another cup. I don't suppose it was absolutely necessary for me to eat or drink but I always had done so to preserve the appearance of reality.

Mar was the chief technician in charge of the Stellar Drive, a big rawboned man with violent red hair, shrewd blue eyes, freckles like pennies. He was naturally a morose man and this trip hadn't improved his disposition.

"I'm under arrest," he said abruptly. "That neuter gendered wasp"—his private name for Captain Lucinda—"relieved me from all duty."

I stared at him in surprise. "Why?"

"One of the technicians gave me some lip. I banged her around."

I could well believe it. Mar Kurbi had no more gallantry than an alligator. If men and women were to work together as equals, he maintained, then they should be treated alike. I've heard many people make similar assertions but Mar was the only one I'd known actually to put it one hundred percent into practise.

He slammed a big knuckled fist on the table. "I don't like it!" he went on. "Looks like they're trying to get me out of the way. What's the idea of making a traverse of the nebula in the first place? By heavens, the next port we make I'm going to jump ship."

I had a futile thought of doing some such thing myself but knew the Watchers wouldn't allow it. I'm never conscious of their interference. But I sure do enough damfool things—things that I wouldn't dream of attempting if I followed my natural inclinations. Like the time I kidnaped the high priestess of Un out of the temple in the forbidden city on Cradaz because the Watchers wanted to question her.

"How did you happen to sign on?" I asked Mar.

He regarded me coldly, then with appalling frankness said, "I was cashiered from the Cosmological Exploration Bureau. I was lucky to get any ship."

I didn't ask him why he had been given a dishonorable discharge and he didn't explain.

"Women," he muttered. "Deliver me from women. They're crazy—the whole lot of them. They'll run us into a dead sun shooting blind through a dark nebula. When I was with the Bureau there was an attempt made to chart this nebula. They lost two ships in here and gave it up."

Before I could say anything, the alarm bell on the bulkhead suddenly broke into a deafening clamor!

I nearly jumped out of my uniform. All over the ship bells began to ring wildly. The whole bank of signal lights flared yellow.

"What did I tell you!" Kurbi yelled. "Grab your seat!"

I felt the ship give a tearing grinding wrench as it dropped back into normal space. The lights dimmed, then went out, due to the shift from hyperspace. At any second I expected the crash that would annihilate us all in one blinding nova-like explosion. It did no good to tell myself that it really was immaterial to me. I was numb with horror.

The alarm bells went on ringing, ringing. . . .

SUDDENLY the lights came on again. I leaped to my feet. The artificial gravity had gone off with the stellar drive and I sailed up to the overhead, giving my head and shoulder a nasty crack. I rebounded to the deck, caught the edge of the door to the alleyway and managed to pull myself through. Half

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dazed I continued to haul myself along by the handrails to the ladder.

Just as I reached the control blister, the tubes roared into life. The Argus was equipped with rocket propulsion for navigating within a planet's immediate gravitational field as well as the stellar drive used in deep space. We were decelerating. I could feel my weight drag at my limbs again.

Captain Lucinda was in the blister together with Miss Danyl and two ordinaries.

"What is it?" I shouted.

The bells had stopped ringing and in the dead silence my voice boomed out like a cannon.

They all stared at me coldly from behind their gleaming golden masks. I could have bitten out my tongue.

"Get below!" Captain Lucinda said acidly.

"But—"

"Do you want to be put under arrest?"

I said, "No," and retreated down the ladder.

When I reached the officer's mess Mar Kurbi was still there. He'd turned on the scanner, which was a device similar to a periscope except that it projected its image onto a screen. It was incredibly powerful too, really a type of search ray. However, the screen registered nothing except the blackness of the nebula outside.

"What's wrong?" he demanded tensely.

I shook my head. "I was ordered off the bridge. I don't know."

He stared at me a moment, then laughed unpleasantly. I didn't see anything funny about it. We were still decelerating and cold sweat was beading my forehead. That was silly. But I couldn't control it and there I was, actually sweating as if I'd been alive.

I wondered what the Watchers were thinking of this.

Kurbi said suddenly: "I can't understand why they signed us on in the first place!"

I knew.

Two of the Argus' regular crew had disappeared mysteriously while in port and the authorities had held up the ship's sailing papers until she had her full complement. Mar and I had been the only licensed officers available. The Watchers had seen to that. They were holding the women from the Argus now for questioning.

The scanner screen on the bulkhead began to glow suddenly. It was just a spot of light that seemed to be playing back and forth across some dark and glittering surface.

"It's the searchbeam! They've turned on the searchbeam," Mar exclaimed. "There's something below us."

We were dropping rapidly, I realized, but at about a thousand meters the stern jets burst into a bull tongue roar kicking us into orbital flight. We went shooting across the surface of some dead planet lost in the veiling nebula.

Mar fiddled with the dials of the scanner, enlarging the image. I could feel my stomach muscles tighten with excitement.

The world below emanated no light, reflected no light. It was as dark as deep space itself, invisible except where the powerful searchbeam of the Argus glittered and sparkled across its surface.

"There's no atmosphere," Mar said. "No signs of life. It's not completely dead though. That's new lava. It must have a molten core."

All at once I realized we were flying over what had been an enormous city—a regular megopolis but so shattered and crumbled as to be almost unrecognizable. We could see the debris-littered canyons that had been broad thoroughfares, huge crumbling piles of masonry and twisted beams. Not a building had escaped the awesome devastation.

It reminded me of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the dropping of the atomic bombs during World War II and I remembered how horrified everybody had been then. But the demolition below had been even more complete.

I could hear Kurbi muttering to himself in amazement.

I should have become inured to surprise. To a man from the past, from the

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twentieth century to be exact, who has gone through the rather terrifying experience of death, nothing thereafter should be very surprising. But the truth was that everything about this fantastic modern Galactic Civilization, from the Watchers to the myriads of strange worlds with their stranger inhabitants, astonished me. I was surfeited with the unbelievable and still capable of being surprised.

The landing bells began to jangle. Red lights flashed on the signal panel.

"We're going down," Kurbi muttered and began to strap himself into his seat.

The scanner revealed a broad plaza below from which the debris had been cleared. The surface began to rise with sickening speed, whirling around and around at the same time.

A thin crack of light appeared in the plaza, widened rapidly to reveal an immense cavern. Great doors, I realized, were opening, sliding aside to allow us to descend into an airlock beneath the surface of this black forbidding world. I could feel the rising hair prickle the nape of my neck.

We came to rest with a grinding jar that threw me against my safety belt. I straightened and stared at Kurbi.

"What do you make of it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It could be anything," he said in a funny voice. "At the rim of the Galaxy anything could happen."

I got up, tried the door, intending to question one of the women. It was locked! I stabbed the button again and again, wrenched at the manual control.

But somebody had locked us in the wardroom!

CHAPTER II

The Lady in Scarlet

THERE was nothing we could do but wait. Warm air, I knew, was flooding the lock, for the Argus was giving off reports like pistol shots as she expanded.

We had been there for two or three hours, I suppose, when the door to the alleyway opened. We both wheeled to face it, expecting to see some member of the crew. I heard Mar grunt in surprise. I almost jumped out of my seat.

Standing in the doorway was a naked scarlet woman!

That was my first shocked impression. Then I saw that she was sheathed from head to foot in red plastic that encased her like a tough outer skin. All, that is, except her head, which was hidden behind a black close-fitting helmet and mask—like a hangman's hood. She was about six feet tall—only a few inches shorter than I—and thewed like a wrestler.

She was holding a weapon of some kind in her hand with which she gestured for us to leave the wardroom. At least I assumed it was a weapon.

Mar Kurbi said, "Who the hell are you, princess?"

But I didn't question her. I had one of those damnable impulses to get up and follow her.

So I did.

Kurbi eyed the tube-like weapon in the woman's hand and decided not to give any trouble either. But he kept grumbling to himself as he trailed us out.

In the corridor a file of the spectacular scarlet-clad women closed about us and we were led to the port, down the gangplank into a vast echoing spacelock, where I could see three other black spacers of the Eldridge Transport Company resting in their cradles.

There was a fourth ship in the hidden port that wrung an exclamation from Kurbi. I know that I had never seen anything like it before.

Nearly twice the size of the Argus, she was constructed throughout of some plastic-like material that was perfectly transparent. Even her decks and bulkheads were clear as crystal so that we could see the swarms of men at work inside her.

I could feel the Watchers' curiosity gnawing away inside me. I was sure they were all there—the five old men—probably the most powerful men in the

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Galactic Federation. For it was their job to know what went on within the Federation as well as on those planets still outside the Union.

The Central Government based all its decisions on the information supplied to them by the Watchers. Their organization was enormous, its tentacles reaching everywhere. They were the most feared, hated and respected men in the Galaxy.

It was a pity, I thought sourly, that everyone didn't know them as well as I did. They were human, all right—too human. I knew all their little idiosyncrasies and weaknesses. Ganz, the eldest, caustic, shrewd, over conservative. Deedrik, whose cynicism hid a ridiculously romantic soul. It was Deedrik who involved me oftenest in hot water.

Heidl, the timid, but brave enough when it was my neck he was risking. Anders, though, really had guts—the things he impelled me to do made my blood run cold. As for Smit, his sense of humor made him the most unpredictable of the lot. I never knew what Smit might take it into his head for me to do.

They were getting an eyeful now, I thought with satisfaction. The air was deafening with shouts, horns, bells. It was chilly too, for the Argus had brought some of the cold of outer space in with her. Hoarfrost stood out on her black sides a foot thick, turning her milk white.

I FELT Mar suddenly nudge me. "Look at the men!" he said.

I had been looking. They reminded me of cavemen—great sullen brutes with shocks of pale yellow hair, small sunken eyes, sloping foreheads, wide mouths. They were all naked as the proverbial jaybird and went about their work sullenly under the direction of women in green plastic cover-alls.

"Slaves," I said.

"Looks like it," he agreed. "They don't belong to the same race as the women."

That seemed obvious. The women were tall, delicately built and shapely—as was abundantly plain through the transparent plastic of their garments. Only their faces were completely hidden. I must confess that I've never been able to rid myself of a certain twentieth century prudishness. I was shocked.

Or maybe it was the Watchers who were shocked.

I noticed another thing. There was the same arrogant contempt in their manner toward the men that had so infuriated me with Miss Danyl.

We weren't given much time for observation but were hustled toward a smaller side entrance. It was guarded by the huge statue of a woman, standing on a pedestal facing the melée of the spaceport as if calmly surveying the noisy confusion. It was incredibly beautiful and so life-like I felt that if I were to scratch it it would bleed.

As I looked at it it turned its head and regarded me expressionlessly out of glittering greenish amber eyes. The skin over my spine literally crawled. It was some mechanical trick, of course, but I'd never seen anything so uncanny.

I'd been intent on the statue and hadn't noticed the group waiting for us at the portal.

It was the crew of the Argus but dressed differently. The officers all wore loose black robes, the personnel a sort of salt and pepper gray. I recognized Miss Danyl, in spite of the thin hammered gold mask, and Captain Lucinda. The warrior women, I noticed, treated them with exaggerated respect.

We filed through a small airlock into a tunnel, which led gradually downward into obscurity. The door closed behind us. Instantly, the noise of the spaceport was sealed off. No one said anything. The only sound was the shuffle of our feet on the bare rock.

It was as if we'd passed from the not too unfamiliar world of the spacelock into some alien underground abode of demons.

The walls and ceiling were covered with a greenish-yellow moss that emitted a pale eerie light. The moss was also a carbon dioxide breather, I learned later, giving off oxygen which kept the air sweet—and like our own earthly lichens, could be eaten in case of neces-

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sity. It grew thick as plush and seemed to act as a sound deadener as well.

As we followed the cavern deeper into the bowels of the planet we began to pass intersecting passages. The air grew hotter and moister until it was almost like a jungle. I noticed that the scarlet-clad guards held their weapon tubes alertly. They would peer cautiously into each intersecting corridor we passed. The whole business was beginning to give me the fidgets.

I said to Mar Kurbi: "What do you reckon they're afraid of?"

Mar shook his head. The freckles were standing out on his white face. I'd never seen him so nervous. If I'd been alive I suppose I would have been nervous too. As it was I was mostly curious.

MISS DANYL was just ahead of us. I touched her shoulder. She jumped a foot, swung around.

"Don't ever *do* that again!" she said in a low furious voice. "It's forbidden to touch a woman—any woman, let alone a Srethguad. Do you want to be turned out?"

I shook my head, though I didn't have the faintest notion what to be "turned out" meant.

"I just wanted to ask why all the precaution?"

"The little people," she replied. "They've been growing bolder lately." She caught Captain Lucinda staring at her and shut up.

I had a hunch Miss Danyl might be almost human if the old battle-ax wasn't along.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes. My blouse stuck to my back. The realism with which I functioned, the minute attention to detail, almost made me doubt the fact that I didn't have any existence.

Judas, I thought, suppose I *am* alive after all! The chances I've taken—that I'm taking now! It made me sweat cold until common sense came to my rescue.

I had lived a perfectly normal life in the twentieth century and died a normal if harrowing death after a normal life span. I didn't have any more real existence—except in the minds of my fellows—than a hallucination. I couldn't help grinning to myself.

By heavens, maybe that's what I was. A hallucination!

I was so engrossed with my speculations that I ran squarely into Miss Danyl before I realized she had come to a dead stop. But instead of turning on me furiously for daring to touch her—a woman and a Srethguad, whatever that was—she didn't appear to notice my sacrilege. She was rigid.

The whole column had halted, everyone staring at something in the passage ahead.

Then I saw it.

It was a man—a small naked man. The creature suddenly gave a weird cry. There was an eager whimpering note to the sound that went through me like a knife.

The call was answered from deeper within the passages. A rustling noise became audible, faint at first but rapidly growing louder, like the pattering of bare feet. It seemed to come from every direction at once.

One of the scarlet warrior-women raised her tube.

The little man dropped his knuckles to the floor, scuttled out of sight into a wide passage, for all the world like a small white hairless ape.

"The little people!" Miss Danyl breathed in a panicky voice.

"He looked harmless enough," I said. That, I felt sure, was Anders speaking through me—for there was gooseflesh all down my spine. The goose-flesh was Deedrik.

The leader of the guards shouted some command. We began to jostle back up the passage the way we'd come. In the press I committed sacrileges right and left but no one seemed to care.

One of the Argus' crew suddenly screamed. We came to a panic-stricken halt again. The passage behind us was jammed solid with the small naked man-things, cutting us off from the space-lock!

Blades of blue coruscating flame leaped from the tubes in the hands of

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the foremost women. Two or three of the little people stumbled and went down as the flame touched them. An oily-black cloud of smoke suddenly obliterated the sweet scent of the moss.

A shrill angry screaming burst from the little monsters' throats. Instead of retreating they charged straight for us.

They came in a rush—those behind pushing the front rank ahead of them like a shield. Nothing could have stopped that utterly abandoned charge. The sheer weight of numbers drove them in amongst us.

I was too astonished to move. Then I was forced backward as the guards went down beneath the ravening pack of little devils. In horror I saw the creatures tearing at the women with their teeth.

Terrified shouts suddenly arose from the rear. I realized that we had been attacked from both ends of the passage. We were in a trap!

A naked little body hurtled onto my back. Small sharp teeth sank into my neck.

I flung the creature over my head like a catapult. Then I went down beneath a swarm of the brutes.

CHAPTER III

The Gods of Iannin

THE Watchers had considered strength and agility a necessity in an agent and they had seen to it that I had both. In fact, due to the peculiarity of my nature, I doubted that it was possible for me to be overcome by purely physical means.

I managed to get my feet under me and rose shaking off the little monsters like bugs. I got hold of one of them by the ankles, swung him around like a bludgeon, clearing a space about myself.

There's nothing as nasty as a free-for-all. I had only one idea. That was to get clear of the whole screaming bloody turmoil.

Then my eyes lit on Miss Danyl. She was down, the mask torn from her face, her blond hair gripped by one of the little brutes. Another was trying to sink his teeth in her throat.

I kicked the creature against the wall of the cavern, hauled Miss Danyl to her feet. Somehow I managed to get us both into the clear.

In disgust I could see that the little people were actually eating the bodies of the slain.

"They never get any meat," Miss Danyl gasped hysterically. "They go crazy at the smell of blood!"

More of the brutes were arriving all the time, drawn by the uproar.

"Run!" I cried, giving the girl a push. "For heavens' sake, run!"

Miss Danyl ran.

Her mask was gone, there certainly wasn't enough left of her black robe to hinder her flight. I had to extend myself to keep up with her.

I let her lead for I figured she must know her way around these passages. We fled down bisecting tunnels twisted, turned until I knew that I was hopelessly lost.

The sound of the fighting grew fainter and fainter, finally disappearing altogether. There was no noise at all except the rasping of our breath, the pound of our feet.

The girl's stride faltered. She came to a stop, sank gasping on the floor, her hand clutching her side.

I dropped beside her. "Where are we?" I asked when I got my breath back.

It was several minutes before she could answer. The horror of the disaster was just beginning to penetrate. Her face was bloodless, the pupils of her eyes like pinpoints.

"The outer tunnels," she said, her teeth beginning to chatter. "There's a regular network beneath the entire surface of Iannin. The cities are deeper."

I recognized the fine Italian hand of the Watchers in my next question—or thought I did.

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"What is this all about?" I demanded. That, I thought, must be Ganz prompting me. Ganz, the eldest, is a peppery old devil. He doesn't beat about the bush.

Miss Danyl gave me a startled glance. Then her hand went to her face. For the first time she seemed to realize that her mask was gone.

I said, "You're a whole lot prettier without it."

She was too. But so help me if she didn't rip a square from the remnants of her gown and tie it around the lower half of her face. Modesty's a queer thing. For the sake of my own I won't describe what was left of the gown.

"You haven't answered my question," I reminded her.

"I don't know where to begin," she said. She had never sounded so humble before. The shock apparently had had a very chastening effect. "This is Iannin, my world. We've lived here always beneath the surface. We didn't dream there were other worlds until recently."

"What about those ruins outside?"

She shrugged naked shoulders. "I know nothing of them."

"Who are the little people?"

"The descendants of outcasts and criminals who've been turned out of the cities to fend for themselves or die," she said with a shudder. "Persons who have violated the sacred Word of the Lords—woman profaners. They've degenerated into mindless soulless animals. They're very prolific and every few years we must exterminate great numbers of them."

She struggled to her feet, her yellow hair falling down her back, one sandal missing, the mask across the bridge of her nose like some feminine version of Billy the Kid.

Her eyes troubled me though. They were inscrutable. They gave me an uncomfortable feeling that she knew a great deal more than she cared to reveal. I couldn't reconcile the contrast between her forlorn little-girl appearance and the arrogant condescending glint that was growing in her eyes.

"We must find sanctuary," she said, "before they discover us. Their sense of smell is very keen."

"Sanctuary?" I repeated.

"The Lords have established them throughout the tunnels," she replied as she set off down the passage.

"Who are the Lords?"

She hesitated before answering. "They are the Lords," she said finally. "Omnipotent and omniscient. The originators and destroyers. They live in Gnoy, the fiery core of the planet."

SO the Lords were the gods of Iannin. Even the Watchers knew better than to interfere with the religion of any people no matter how bizarre it might seem.

"And you?" I asked.

"I am a Srethguad—one of the elect—handmaiden to the Lords. No man may look upon my face—or touch me."

I thought her voice sounded a bit distressed but that was probably Deedrik leaping to conclusions again. I began to grow a little alarmed that the old fool might become fond of the girl. He's played tricks on me like that before.

That sounds a little confusing, I expect. I have a bad habit of attributing this or that action to one or the other of the Watchers as if I were conscious of being commanded to do thus or so. Actually I was not conscious of their interference at all. I was not even aware of them.

For I had the illusion of free will. But it was only an illusion. In reality they directed my actions as a pilot directs the flight of an airplane and I knew them well enough to guess when I was responding to Deedrik or Ganz or one of the others.

I ought to know them. I was a projection of their combined thought processes.

It's rather difficult to explain. I had to appear to function normally, else the illusion would break down—or so the Watchers had informed me. Unfortunately a large bump of curiosity had been incorporated in my make-up. It really annoyed me that I couldn't

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quite grasp why I should tick at all.

The Watchers had tried to explain. They are all men who have succeeded in developing the telepathic sense. Consequently they are able to plant illusions in the minds of those about them.

I'm that illusion.

They chose me because I had been rather well known during the twentieth century. All the facts of my life were available in the several biographies about me, the newspaper articles, photographs and what not. From this data they were able to create in their own minds an excellent idea of what I had been like.

The next step was to convince someone that I actually existed in the flesh. They talked about me, described me, then one day introduced me to a man who was under their telepathic control.

In a way I suppose the fellow was hypnotized into believing in my existence. As far as that man was concerned, I was alive. He never dreamed that I was nothing but a figment of his own distorted imagination—an hallucination. By sort of a post-hypnotic control they could materialize me in his eyes whenever they wished.

It wasn't long before I had a whole circle of friends who believed in me implicitly. The Watchers kept widening their sphere of influence until I was firmly implanted in the minds of literally scores upon scores of people.

I was given a room, an income, a business, a past. They never overlooked the slightest detail. I wasn't allowed to dematerialize.

All this was understandable enough. What I couldn't figure out was the fact that I seem to be chain active. By that I mean the illusion was contagious. People with whom the Watchers had no contact, over whom they had no control caught it from those already infected—like the contagion of mob hysteria—so that I could move around, travel, have almost an independent existence as long as the chain wasn't broken.

All this made me a very handy tool for the Watchers, who could send me anywhere without any danger to themselves. On the other hand they had to relinquish a great part of their control over me.

I had about come to the conclusion that in reality I did what other people expected me to do. I can't say I was flattered. It made me out sort of a mental chameleon. But it's the only way I can account for what happened next.

At least *I* wasn't responsible—a comforting and consoling thought.

We had come to an inclined passage slanting downward. Miss Danyl halted. "This will lead to the canals where we'll find a sanctuary." She studied me soberly. "I don't like to sound ungrateful, Mr. Barclay, but it's different down here. I know the men beyond the nebula consider themselves the equals of women. But our men are—well—brutes."

I said in surprise, "Those apemen in the airlock? They belong to the same race that you do?"

She nodded. "They're coarse ill-natured beasts. We keep only what males are needed for manual labor and"—her throat pinked—"the perpetuation of the species."

"That gets around it very neatly," I said with a grin, recognizing Smit's ribald sense of humor at work.

"You don't think—" she began in horror, then recovering her arrogance, said, "*Mr.* Barclay, the Srethguads are not brood mares. That disagreeable duty is relegated to the common women."

I don't know what possessed me, rather I didn't have time to figure which Watcher was responsible. But I reached out, unfastened her mask.

WITH a gasp, she made an ineffectual effort to stop me. The blood swept all the way to the roots of her hair. In the confusion she was so pretty that I couldn't help grabbing her.

Like a flash she put her head down, butted me in the mouth, kicked me in the shins, dug her nails in my shoulders. I turned loose of her a whole lot quicker than I'd grabbed her.

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She drew back panting, her eyes glinting wickedly. "Mr. Barclay," she said, "if the Srethguads ever discover what you have done you'll be killed—which would be quite all right with me and no more than you deserve. But I would be stripped and turned loose in the outer tunnels!"

Without another word she started down the ramp. I followed her, cursing the Watchers under my breath. I suspected Deedrik. His ears should have been red because I called him every name I could think of. However knowing him as I did, I realized that he was probably amused by the whole incident.

We reached the bottom of the ramp, where it opened upon the black waters of an underground canal. A stone dock jutted out into the water. Next to the dock I saw a low archway leading to a high-ceilinged grotto.

"This is the sanctuary!" Miss Danyl whispered. I realized that some superstitious terror was gripping her. I was surprised, for generally the priesthood of a caste is the least impressed.

"My name," she went on hurriedly, "my real name is Daja—Daja, Srethguad. If you ever need me I'll try to help. I owe you that much for saving my life. But please Mr. Barclay, try to treat the women with a little more respect even if you don't feel it."

She hastily readjusted the mask over her face. I was sincerely touched and feeling like a cad. Here was I, planning to use her in order to gather information for the Watchers. While there wasn't anything I could do about it at least I had the grace to be ashamed of myself.

Besides I liked her altogether too well for a man who wasn't even alive.

She took a deep breath, threw back her shoulders, entered the sanctuary. As I followed her through the portal I came to a dead stop and frankly gaped.

Dominating the chamber was the giant statue of a woman identical with the one at the airlock. It seemed to be regarding us from greenish-amber eyes.

Miss Danyl—Daja, Srethguad—prostrated herself on the floor in front of it, addressing it in the unfamiliar language of Iannin.

That was when I received one of the greatest shocks of my existence. For the statue replied in a low musical voice in the same language and even though I couldn't understand a word that was being spoken I felt a strange exaltation possess me.

Radio, I thought—television. There were any number of explanations. However the psychological impact was terrific. Later I was to learn that the statue could direct an annihilating barrage of flame at the door, thus protecting anyone within the sanctuary from the little people.

At a command from the statue Daja arose. There was a queer expression about the girl's eyes as she turned to me. "Put your hands into the hands of the Lord and look into her eyes."

I suspected some sort of telepathic brain picking but I wasn't much alarmed. After all it would be the Lords of Iannin against the Watchers—with me as intermediary—and I'd put my money on the Watchers any day.

I received another shock when I advanced to the pedestal.

The statue leaned over and took my hands in her own. They were warm and soft with a texture almost like flesh!

Some form of plastic, I assumed. Then my eyes met the Lord's. The room seemed to swim. I had the feeling I was drowning in those eyes.

I fought it in growing panic. If I went out, I thought wildly, I'd cease to exist! I didn't dare lose consciousness. The chain would be broken!

In all the time since my materialization I'd never entirely lost consciousness—not even to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

The Underground Venice

I SHOULD have had more faith in the Watchers. I was too firmly implanted in the minds of too many people

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to be snuffed out like that.

I was sucked to the very edge of unconsciousness but managed to fight my way back before I went all the way. Wrenching my hands from the statue's grasp I wheeled to find the girl staring at me out of bewildered frightened eyes.

Then even as I watched her expression changed. She reached up and unfastened her mask, smiling at me.

"Sit down," she said. "Rest. There's a boat coming for us to take us to Fradl."

"How do you know?" I demanded suspiciously.

"The Lord told me." She tapped her forehead. "It spoke in here like a voice in the mind."

"Telepathy," I said. "Where's Fradl?"

SHE had turned to the wall where she was opening lockers, displaying preserved foods, clothing, weapons. Fradl, she explained, was the capital city of Iannin. There were a dozen or more cities, all connected by an intricate system of canals. But Fradl was the chief one, where the gate to Gnoy, the home of the Lords, was located.

She seemed eager to please. But I was suspicious, though she answered my questions readily enough.

She didn't know when the boat would be there. The fact was that time meant nothing to her. In a world without night or day or changing seasons it is difficult to judge the passage of time.

For that matter I had no idea how long we were in the sanctuary before the boat came for us. It may have been days, weeks or months. The place was fitted up with all sorts of conveniences and I know we slept and ate many times. That is, Daja slept while I lay awake, trying to make sense of all the things that I was learning from the girl.

Some time in the past, she told me, the Lords had informed the Srethguads that a ship from the outer darkness had landed upon the surface of Iannin.

How long ago? She shrugged her shoulders. A long time—she had no way of guessing. But a party of Srethguads had been equipped with space-suits and had gone out to examine the strange ship.

They found that it had crashed, killing everyone save two men who had managed to seal themselves in the undamaged afterpart. They were both horribly mutilated—one so badly that he died before they could get him into the tunnels. The other they sent through the Gate to Gnoy.

She had never seen him since.

Later she was called before the Lords and by means of some telepathic treatment from the statues an understanding of Lingua Galactica as well as a thorough working knowledge of astro-navigation and the Galaxy had been implanted in her brain. She was assigned to the post of chief navigator aboard the Argus—a ship patterned after the wrecked vessel.

But when I asked her why all the secrecy she shook her head. The Eldridge Transport Company had been established as a blind.

She didn't know what cargoes were being brought back to Iannin or for what purpose.

She said helplessly, "It's not in my department."

"But why," I repeated.

"The Will of the Lords." That was her stock answer. I even tried asking the statue but it ignored me. In fact it didn't speak during the remainder of our stay in the sanctuary.

While we were there Daja taught me the language of Iannin. I picked it up quickly, which isn't surprising, considering the fact that five of the best linguists in the Galaxy were concentrating on it.

Daja used every artifice in the book to extract information from me.

If I'd been human—alive, that is—I couldn't have resisted her. She made Delilah look like an amateur. Altogether I thoroughly enjoyed myself and was almost sorry when the boat finally arrived.

Our first intimation of its presence was a harsh grating noise, followed by shouts, as it eased into the dock outside the portal.

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Daja sprang to her feet, dashed outside. A long low rakish craft was being moored to the dock by surly looking men. A cluster of bright scarlet-clad warrior women lined the rails. The deck was flat, a companionway at the bow and stern. Three Srethguads in their black robes and beaten gold masks stood in the bow.

A gangplank was run overside and Daja stepped onto it lightly. I followed. No sooner had I reached the deck than the crimson-armored warriors closed around me, seized me roughly. I could hear Daja gasp. It was some satisfaction to realize that she hadn't enticed me into a trap consciously. My reaction was instinctive.

I shook the women loose, planted my foot in the stomach of one of them and shoved her clear across the deck and into the canal. I swung another overhead by the back of her neck and her legs, heaved her into the black oily waters.

ONE of the warrior-women grabbed me from behind. I gave her the old flying mare. The deck of the canal boat was no more than ten feet wide and she too sailed into the water with a splash. Kicking out backwards I succeeded in knocking the feet from under another. She clawed frantically at the gunwale. I was about to step on her head when I heard Daja screaming.

"Jon! Jon! *Stop!* They'll turn you out, Jon!"

I stopped. I'd almost cleared the deck anyway. The men were watching with broad grins on their bestial faces, hugely enjoying the discomfiture of the women. None of them though had made any effort to come to my aid. Then I saw that several of the crimson guards were training the flame tubes on them.

For some reason they hadn't used the tubes on me. I wondered why not, decided that they must have had orders to take me alive.

"Please, Jon!" Daja pleaded. "Don't resist. There's no place to escape to but the outer tunnels and the little people. Don't make it hard for yourself."

The guards were being fished out of the canal. The ones left on deck closed around me again with considerably more respect in their manner and fastened manacles about my wrists, chained my ankles together.

I don't suppose the manacles could have held me since I wasn't alive in any material sense. However it was necessary for me to preserve the appearance of reality and I submitted with a shrug. The iron certainly bit into my flesh in a highly realistic and uncomfortable manner.

The three Srethguads had remained apart, unmoved and unmoving, disdainfully ignoring the squabble among us of the lower orders.

Now one of them, whom I took to be a high priestess from her manner and the fact that a large oval gem was set in the forehead of her gold mask like a third eye, pointed at Daja.

She said in Ianninian, "Daja, Srethguad. The Lords are omniscient and omnipotent. Did you think to deceive them? They, who know even your innermost thoughts!"

I could see the girl start, then shrink away from the old biddy. She gave a frightened sob, fell on her knees, holding up her arms in a pleading gesture.

But the high priestess was inexorable. "You have betrayed the Lords with this man, allowing him to look upon your face." Then she went on to enumerate the various charges against Daja —things that I couldn't imagine how she'd learned until I remembered the statue in the sanctuary. Obviously it was a televisor of some kind.

Superstition is a terrible thing—doubly so when it can twist science to its own purposes. I didn't understand the principle behind the statue but the Galactic Federation had machines that could read minds. Why even back in the poor old benighted twentieth century there were drugs which broke down subconscious barriers so that a person would spill everything he knew, thought or felt.

I was not impressed. "It's a trick," I told Daja in Lingua Galactica. But I don't think she even heard me.

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The high priestess glowered at me, then her eyes returned to the cowering girl. "Hear your fate, Daja Srethguad," she intoned. "She who betrays the Lords is to be outcast."

Daja gave a frightened gasp. At a sign from the high priestess two of the warrior women seized her, tore off her mask and gown, thrust her naked down the gangplank to the cold stone dock.

I was taken so completely by surprise that I could only gape.

Daja's back was to us but she had her hands to her face and her shoulders shook convulsively.

I lost my temper. I didn't give a hoot about the Watchers or keeping up the appearance of reality. Daja had befriended me. She was the only one in this travesty of a world who had. I lunged for the gangplank. I didn't pay any more attention to the irons about my wrists and ankles than if they hadn't been there.

As a result I fell flat on my face on the deck with a loud clank!

I couldn't believe it. The manacles held. Though I strained until I was slippery with sweat and the warm blood ran down my wrist where the iron bit through the skin I couldn't free myself.

IT began to dawn on me then that the Watchers didn't want me to go to the girl's rescue.

They wanted me to be carried to Fradl, where I could get to the bottom of the mystery.

I cursed them savagely for all the good it did. At least I had one thing to be thankful for. Daja could go in the sanctuary, where she would find food and clothes and where she would be safe from the little people.

And I glanced toward the portal, only to see that it was sealed by a solid sheet of blue flame.

Daja was already climbing the ramp into the semi-obscurity, into the outer tunnels where the little people laired, where the criminals and brutish men who had escaped from the cities, dwelt in packs.

"Daja! Daja!" I yelled in despair. She didn't look back but stumbled on, a pale shadow in the gloom that was closing around her.

It was my last glimpse of her—for the guards carried me to the bows, where they tossed me into a small stuffy hold in the forepeak. The hatch was slammed in place overhead. With a smooth surge of power, the craft began its journey upon the silent waters of the underground canal.

I don't know how long the trip lasted, but I had considerable time and food for thought. That is, the Watchers did and as I reflected their mental processes it amounted to the same thing.

Science, it appeared to me, had been perverted in Iannin in order to maintain a small priestly caste in absolute power. The rest of the people were in total ignorance, believing without question that it was all done through the supernatural intervention of the Lords. Even the lower orders of the Srethguads didn't suspect the truth. So much had I learned from Daja.

Who then were these Lords? I refused to believe in any salamander-like divinities who dwelt in the molten core of the planet.

According to the girl though no one had ever seen them, the Lords often spoke to the Srethguads but it was like a voice in the mind, she had explained—obviously some form of telepathy.

I had asked her if any mortals ever descended into Gnoy. "Yes," she replied. "When the call comes they go to the gates which are always open to receive them. But no one has ever returned." Then she told me a surprising thing.

Nothing was manufactured upon Iannin. Raw materials, were produced in abundance but these were sent to Gnoy in the form of offerings and returned, transformed by the mysterious alchemy of the Lords, into clothes and weapons and utensils—all the millions of items necessary to the people's welfare. It was incredible.

I rolled over, tried to find a comfortable position in the cramped forepeak. "Let the Watchers wrestle with it," I thought. "Curse them for a pack of med-

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dling cold-blooded inhuman senile monsters!"

Anyway, I had an idea that I was bound for Gnoy, where I would learn the answers first hand.

Fradl was utterly fantastic—an underground Venice with labyrinthian canals, which carried the traffic of the city. There were streets as well on the level above the canals. The entire city, which housed several million people, had been cut from the solid rock. It was the most stupendous engineering feat I'd ever seen.

Not that I saw much of it—for I was kept in my prison until we docked, then hauled out into the dazzling yellow light. The moss grew everywhere but Fradl didn't depend on it for illumination and my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom of the outer tunnels. I was as blind as a mole during the greater part of our journey to the temple.

We were pulled through the narrow street-tunnels in rickshaw-like conveyances by the sullen man-brutes. The Srethguads had their own vehicle, which was completely curtained. I came next in an open cart while the guards trotted along behind.

I felt like one of the French aristocrats being hauled through the curious crowds to the guillotine in a tumbrel.

WE came upon the temple unexpectedly, leaving the noisy tunnel with its crowds of masked women to thread our way across a black chasm upon a ribbon of stone. I sucked in my breath in amazement.

Apparently a great circular shaft, almost a mile in diameter, had been driven straight down through the crust of the planet. I leaned over the edge of the cart, peered downward, but I could see no bottom. Nor could I make out any roof overhead.

In the center of the shaft and almost filling it, rose a circular pillar, whose foundation also was lost in the awesome depths and which ascended upward out of sight. Thin spans of stone connected it with the inner walls of the pit like the spokes of a wheel and it was upon one of these spans that we were crossing the abyss.

There was a door in the column, flanked by a pair of the giant statues. The door opened mechanically ahead of us and without pausing we entered a vast high-ceilinged antechamber.

Here I was freed from the manacles. The men pulled their vehicles away, this outer chamber being as far as they were allowed to go into the temple.

In fact I began to realize that I was creating no little consternation among the Srethguads. I was the first man to profane the inner temple within memory. But it was the Will of the Lords. And that was that.

I'll say this for them. I didn't profane it long.

I was bidden to follow the high priestess. The guards closed in behind me, their tubes at the alert, and we proceeded thus through empty halls and corridors under the eyes of the watchful statues, which seemed to be everywhere.

There wasn't a Srethguad in sight. When I asked the high priestess where everyone was she informed me tartly that they'd been ordered to their cells so they wouldn't have to see a man defile the sacred precincts with his presence.

After what she'd done to Daja I would have enjoyed nothing better than to wring the old girl's neck. But I had no desire to be roasted by those flame tubes—and I didn't know to what lengths the Watchers might let me go in their mania for realism.

I was beginning to suspect the Watchers of possessing a sadistic streak—Anders, particularly, the cold blooded old devil. I thought I could sense him chuckling over my predicament now.

We entered a circular room in the center of which was a pit about a hundred feet in diameter and as bottomless as the shaft outside the temple. Apparently it was an inner shaft, driven down through the core of the central column which housed the temple. It gave me vertigo just to look over the edge.

A statue—of a man for a change, a regular A d o n i s—towered over our heads. It had been erected on the far

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side of the pit while a trick spotlight effect made the substance of which it was moulded glow with an inner illumination.

If that was their ideal, I thought, no wonder the women on this benighted planet turned up their noses at the general run of men.

The Srethguads were making deep obeisances before the statue but it had its yellow-green eyes fixed on me.

"The gate is open," the statue said suddenly in a ringing baritone. "The Lords are waiting."

The high priestess straightened, confronting me. And pointed at the pit. "The Gate to Gnoy," she said. "Enter, man from beyond the outer darkness."

I took one look at that bottomless hole, its sides smooth as a cannon bore, and backed away hastily. I thought she must be kidding but I wasn't taking any chances.

"Enter!" she repeated viciously and stabbed her finger at the pit. "The Lord has spoken!"

I understood then why no one had ever come back from Gnoy. "You're nutty as a fruitcake!" I said, "If you think I'm going to throw myself down there."

I had spoken English and she couldn't have understood me. But she made some sign and before I realized what was happening, two of the husky guards had come up behind me, grabbed me by the collar and the seat of my pants. I don't know anything as frustrating as to be held by the collar and the seat of the pants. I was marched to the edge of the pit and hurled over.

I'll guarantee that it was the most undignified entrance into the nether world ever made by man.

CHAPTER V

Forbz

I YELLED. I yelled bloody murder as I shot downward and I'm not ashamed to admit it. The memory of that fall still brings cold sweat to my forehead.

After the first sickening plunge there was no particular sensation of falling. I seemed to be floating downward, borne up by a column of air like a ball supported by a fountain of water.

Suddenly I realized that the rush of the walls past me had slowed down to a crawl. I was in a gravity lift!

I was floating downward like a feather. The relief was so great that I must have acted like a madman. I laughed and laughed and couldn't stop laughing. The realization that I was having an old fashioned fit of hysterics sobered me quickly enough.

Gnoy! So this was the gate to Gnoy, the strange subterranean heaven of Iannin. It was growing hotter, I realized. The walls were perfectly smooth and black—old rock, the fundamental gneiss of the planet. Gradually the shaft began to curve until I was being swept along on a horizontal plane.

I didn't have the faintest idea how far beneath the surface I was. Suddenly I passed through a field of totally lightless airless space and popped out of the gravity lift like a cartridge out of a pneumatic tube.

I lit sprawling in a terminal of some kind—for I could see the entrances of dozens of other tube mouths. In shape the great chamber was a perfect half-sphere with a chart on the ceiling. Threads of red light indicated the various routes, I supposed. There were other symbols in green and blue, white, yellow and purple lights. It was striking but incomprehensible—to me at least.

And the terminal was empty.

I turned around and around uncomfortably aware of the silence. I was staring at one sector of the wall when a tall powerfully-built man, naked except for short kilts, floated from one of the tube mouths, lighting on the balls of his feet on the terminal floor with the ease and grace of an acrobat.

We regarded each other with no little interest. He was a regular giant, seven feet tall at least, young and too handsome. Despite his powerful muscular de-

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velopment there was something decadent about him, some indefinable quality of softness, of femininity like Praxiteles' statue of Apollo.

"You are Barclay," he said in the language of Iannin, "the man from beyond the nebula." He said it as he might have said, "You're an ape, aren't you? A low unreasoning animal with a superficial resemblance to man." Moreover he was entirely unconscious of the patronage in his tone.

I could have kicked him. Instead I said, "That's right, and what are you? Masculine, feminine or neuter?"

"My name is Sreth," he replied, oblivious to my sarcasm. "I've been sent to bring you before the Master."

I couldn't see any use in putting up an argument and so accompanied him wordlessly across the strangely glowing floor, stepped through the curtain of darkness into the tube mouth he indicated.

Instantly, I felt the force take hold of me, sweep me along. Sreth, I saw, had followed me and was being carried along at my elbow. I relaxed. The sensation was not unpleasant—like a blood corpuscle being swept through an artery, I imagine.

AFTER about a kilometer the walls of the tube became transparent and I caught my first glimpse of Gnoy.

We were being whisked across an enormous cavern filled with machinery at whose purpose I couldn't guess.

Some were intricate—a maze of spinning wheels—others sat still with no visible moving parts. I had just a glimpse—for we were traveling at an enormous speed and the cavern had flashed past almost before I realized it.

The solid rock had scarcely closed around us again before we were entering a second cavern. We were swept through one great chamber after another, all of them filled with the humming thundering maze of machines, illuminated by blinding blue light.

"What is it?" I shouted at Sreth and felt my ears redden as he answered in perfectly normal tones, "The machinery that supports the inner world of Gnoy as well as the outer caverns."

"But doesn't anyone tend it?" I asked. For in not one of the caverns had I seen a single living thing.

He smiled condescendingly. "It is self operating, self repairing. Long after we are gone the machines will continue to function."

"Gone?" I asked. "Where?"

He gave me his long cool stare but didn't answer. Finally he said, "The Master believes that you're a spy. He even thinks it possible that you are in telepathic contact with someone beyond the nebula. For my part you would have been destroyed long before this."

He made my blood run cold, the calm way he mentioned destroying me—as if I had been a horse. Then I remembered that it was practically impossible to do any such thing since I wasn't alive to begin with.

I laughed as unpleasantly as I could. "Maybe this Master of yours knows more about it than you do," I said.

"Oh, no," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "That's impossible. We are *Yhw*. And He is an animal and not a very high order of animal at that."

I stared at him with my mouth open. Such colossal egoism! The word *Yhw* means approximately superhuman. That's as near as it can be translated though there are overtones to the word. He wasn't claiming to be a god exactly. Rather that he belonged to some order definitely superior to man.

I set my jaws and then I grinned. I couldn't help it. Back on Earth, in the Watchers' tower, Smit no doubt was grinning too, thinking as I was that the Lordlings of Gnoy had played at being gods for so long that they had convinced themselves.

Before I could question Sreth further the tube swept us abruptly downward into yet a lower level of this bizarre underworld heaven. The light changed. From the dazzling bluish-white, which the machines required for their operation, it became a warm liquid yellow.

These lower caverns were different in other respects too. They were like a

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vast city embedded in solid glass. The natural rock had been removed, converted into what seemed to be the clearest crystal. From this transparent material the streets and halls and apartments—even great park-like areas—had been cut away.

However the vision was queerly limited, distorted by imperfections in the transparent substance. There were people on the streets, in the rooms—but through the great thickness of crystal at which I saw them they were inhuman shadows. Sometimes they appeared to give off prismatic colors like weird tropical fish.

It was utterly fascinating, a world only half-glimpsed.

I was still absorbed in the kaleidoscopic view when we sailed out of the tube. Sreth stepped out daintily but I went sprawling, feeling like a clown being shot from the mouth of a cannon. I scrambled to my feet, cursing the force tubes heartily.

Sreth smiled his infuriating smile and bade me follow him.

I saw that we had been ejected, spewed out rather, into another terminal. The Lordling, however, led me to a moving ramp, which carried us up out of the terminal into a great auditorium. Through its clear crystal walls I could see the street beyond, crowded with the denizens of this underworld.

Tall handsome men and women, clad for the most part in short pleated kilts. There was no bustle, no hurrying. Even Sreth, I realized, moved with a leisurely indifference as if time meant nothing to him. He conducted me through a door that led away from the street and deeper into the building, if such it could be called.

"Sreth," I said, unable to keep the awe entirely out of my voice, "what is this place?"

"The Temple of Life," he replied cryptically.

I said, "Oh." I'd noticed a peculiar thing. As we penetrated deeper into the heart of the temple the walls became increasingly opaque. Abruptly Sreth halted.

BEFORE us was one of those lightless curtains of force sealing off the passage. It was pure black and looked as solid as marble.

"Beyond this curtain lies the Master," said Sreth. "Here I must leave you."

I licked my lips dryly, not knowing what kind of monster I would find. Believe me, I'm no braver than the next person but I could feel the Watchers impelling me forward. I suppose their curiosity was devouring them—particularly Deedrik, with his goatish beard and shrewd pale blue eyes.

So with a sigh of resignation, I stepped through the curtain.

The light dazzled me. I could hear a murmur run around the blindingly bright chamber. I squinted my eyes, which stung and watered. Gradually they adjusted and figures began to materialize out of the brilliant haze.

I seemed to be in a reception hall. There were people clustered in groups about the chamber, staring at me, whispering. They belonged to the same tall handsome race as Sreth.

A voice said, "Leave us," and the people began to drift through the curtained exits.

I turned toward the voice. The hairs rose on the back of my neck. All the warmth seemed to drain out of me, leaving me cold and empty. I couldn't believe my eyes.

Floating just above the floor was a transparent sphere a meter or so in diameter. There was a peculiar shimmer to the sphere which made me believe that it was a shell of force. Inside the shell was a gray mass that looked like a brain.

But what a brain!

Twice—no, three times the size of a normal human brain, the gray convolutions seemed to pulse slowly. Crystal clear tubes piped the bright scarlet blood from a heart-like pump. There were other mechanisms—hundreds of them—constructed of such clear plastic that it was almost impossible to distinguish them. And the brain—if brain it were—was staring at me from twin lenses housed inside the force field.

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"You're Barclay," it said, though I couldn't tell how it spoke. "You're a Terran."

I nodded. I couldn't have spoken if my life had depended on it. Finally I managed, "You are the Master? The Lord of Iannin?"

"Good heavens no!" said the sphere. "I'm Forbz. I'm an Earthman."

I just gaped at the thing. "Listen," I said, "I was born on Earth. Nothing like you ever was spawned—"

"I was captain of the Comet," the sphere interrupted. "She was wrecked on the surface of Iannin."

The Comet, I remembered suddenly, was one of the Cosmological Exploration Board's two spacers which had been lost trying to chart the nebula. This, then, was the only survivor, whom the Srethguads had sent through the gate into Gnoy.

I couldn't believe it. The size of the brain, for one thing. It simply wasn't human.

The creature must have read the scepticism in my expression for it actually chuckled.

"The Lords," it said, as if that explained everything. "Some of their work verges on the miraculous. I was so badly mutilated by the crash that there was no hope of saving my body. They removed my brain, devised this mechanism to keep me alive. I can hear, see, speak, move around as I please.

"In a way I'm better off. The mechanism is self-repairing, self-perpetuating, self-regulating, like all their machines. The force field is indestructible." The chuckle emerged again. "I couldn't even destroy myself."

I was beginning to recover my self-possession—or rather the Watchers were, I suppose. Questions thrust themselves into my consciousness.

"What's this all about? Why do the Lords speak of you as the Master? Why was I brought here?"

THE sphere continued to regard me from those expressionless twin lenses. There was something hypnotic about them. I had the peculiar sensation that it was trying to see inside my mind, feel me out.

"Suppose I answer your last question first," the brain said finally. "The Lords are afraid of you because they can't read your mind. They don't know what you are, how you function. You don't respond to the statues—"

"What are those things?" I interrupted.

"The statues? The most diabolical machines ever invented by warped mentalities," the brain replied with such venom that I felt my blood run cold. "Not only do they act as televisors but are mind readers as well—literally. The Lords can probe down into the realms of an individual's subconscious, unearthing things a person doesn't suspect about himself.

"Moreover, by means of the statues, they can plant compulsions, desires, neurotic fears, psychological blocks, in the mind of anyone coming under their influence. And they have them everywhere throughout the upper levels.

"Not an inch of the caverns above but isn't under their constant surveillance and control. Do you wonder that the upper races consider the Lords divine, omnipotent and omniscient."

It gave me a bad moment when I remembered the statue in the sanctuary bending over and clasping my hands. "What did they learn from me?" I asked dryly.

"Nothing—a b s o l u t e l y nothing." There was a puzzled note in the sphere's voice. "There was an impenetrable barrier reared between your mind and the machine."

The Lords would have a hard time reading something that didn't exist, I thought with a certain satisfaction. I'd been in hot water for so long that it was a positive relief to have proof that I wasn't alive and so out of their power.

"They fear you," the brain went on, "because they can't comprehend you. They're even worried that you may be in telepathic contact with someone beyond the nebula."

"Rubbish!" I said rudely, recognizing Ganz's manner. He's too old to bother

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about being polite. I've been embarrassed more than once at some of the things he has prompted me to say.

"I mean," I hastened to explain, "if they suspected me of being a spy, why did they bring me down here where I could find out what they were up to?" I paused. "What are they up to?"

The brain was silent. I couldn't tell whether it was offended or not.

"You're in danger," it said at length in an ominous voice. "As soon as they satisfy themselves about you, they'll dispose of you. But of considerable more importance, the entire Galactic Federation is threatened.

"I hope you're in telepathic contact with the Federation. I hope and pray that they can know what I am telling you. For there's no chance that you will carry the information back to them. You'll never leave Gnoy alive."

I felt my mouth go dry. But I don't suppose the Watchers were very impressed. "How is it threatened?" I found myself demanding.

"The Lords are going to emigrate."

"So what? There's plenty of room in the Galaxy to accommodate them."

"You don't understand their psychology. They consider the human race a lower order. They plan to take over the Galaxy."

The thought of the Lordlings of Iannin attacking the powerful Galactic Federation with its billions of citizens, its vast armada of spacers, struck me as the height of the ridiculous. Even so, I wouldn't have snorted—which I did. That was Ganz prompting me again.

The brain of Forbz retorted dryly, "Don't underestimate them, Mr. Barclay. They work from inside, get absolute control of key men. You are unique in the fact that they can't penetrate your mind. That isn't the case with most people, who are vulnerable to their mental attack.

"The terrible thing is that the Galactic Federation wouldn't even realize it was being attacked. The danger is real. I'm telling you, Mr. Barclay, that in time they will reduce the entire Galactic Federation to the same benighted state as those barbaric superstition-ridden creatures of the upper levels."

"But that would take generations, centuries!" I protested.

"Time means nothing to them," the sphere said in its faintly inhuman voice. "The *Yhw* are immortal."

CHAPTER VI

The Source of Immortality

IMMORTAL! I could feel a thrill of fear run through me and knew that the Watchers at long last were really worried.

There is something inexorable about the idea of immortality. *The wheels of time grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small.* What could an ordinary mortal with his short life-span expect to do against a people which had all eternity to accomplish its ends?

I could feel the brain's eyes focused on me intently. "Mr. Barclay," it said, "now do you appreciate the seriousness of the situation?"

"But it's hopeless," I blurted out.

"They can be killed," the brain replied dryly. "They don't die from old age but they can be killed, Mr. Barclay. If the Federation could send a fleet of spacers before they had a chance to—"

"But how can we warn the Federation?" I demanded. "You said there was no escape."

I thought the brain sighed. It was such a fleeting whisper that I couldn't be sure. There wasn't another sound in the room. I don't yet know what it was that warned me but I wheeled around suddenly to find four of the tall *Yhw* creeping up behind me like cats stalking a mouse.

Personally I would have submitted without a struggle—for the *Yhw* were giants with muscles like hawsers for all their decadent appearance. But Heidl, the Watcher, had to stick in his oar. Heidl must be all of four feet tall and has the courage of a rabbit. I could see

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him swelling with indignation as he swept me willy-nilly into that brawl.

I didn't know what the Lords intended to do to me but it couldn't have been much worse than what they did. One of them had a metal rod with which he apparently planned to stun me. When they saw that they were discovered, he leaped forward, swung it viciously at the base of my skull.

I ducked but not quickly enough and it caught me a hasty glancing blow. Fortunately the Watchers must have visualized me with a good thick skull. Stars seemed to burst in my head but I didn't go out.

I kicked the Lordling in the stomach —hard. And when he doubled over I snatched the rod from his hand and let him have it behind the ear.

The other three were beating at me with their fists but for all their strength the Lords of Iannin had neither the stomach nor the knowledge for hand-to-hand fighting. I kicked, bit, kneed, gouged, butted and swung the rod with telling effect.

It took me about three minutes to get all four of them stretched senseless on the floor. I heard the brain give a gasp as I straightened.

"Mr. Barclay! Mr. *Barclay! Listen* to me," it cried. "I'm free for a moment. They've had me under their control but you have startled them so that they've forgotten me. You must escape—*hide!* They intend to perform an autopsy on you to see why they can't read your mind!"

I stared at the sphere. "Hide. Where?"

If the brain had possessed hands it would have wrung them, I'm sure. "I don't know, I don't know. But believe me they're desperate. They're afraid that their secret is out. Their fear of death is neurotic! They fear death a thousand times worse than an ordinary person. That's why they've sealed themselves off from the upper race. That's why they've been at such pains to keep their very existence a secret."

"How do they expect to conquer the Galaxy without showing themselves?" I demanded.

"They work like a puppet master, Mr. Barclay, and we're the puppets. They'll gradually enslave us as they have the upper race." The brain's voice was low but hurried. His words literally popped out so fast that it was difficult for me to follow him.

I said, "You were under their control before the fight?"

"Yes."

"How much of what you told me was true?"

"It was true—all true. I never told you anything that you wouldn't have been able to figure out. But they're not so afraid of you as they would have you believe. Because I was an Earthman they hoped that I could learn your secret."

"What makes you think I have a secret?"

THE brain said, "But you're not human, Mr. Barclay—else they could read your thoughts. There's something alien about you. You aren't what you appear. It's almost as if you were being directed by some outside intelligence."

I didn't say anything. I guess the Watchers were flabbergasted. I know I was. "Forbz," I said at length, "I've never heard of such rubbish. For some reason the Lords can't tell what I'm thinking and that's all there is to it." A course of action was beginning to shape itself in my mind.

The Watchers were recovering from their shock, I suppose. With a sinking feeling I sensed that they intended to use me as a tool. Heretofore I had played the more-or-less passive role of observer, giving them a chance to assimilate the facts through my senses.

Now they were trying to figure some way to use me in order to throw a monkey wrench into the Lords' plans. I couldn't guess how they expected me—one man and not real at that—to defeat a race of immortals.

I shivered. Only the devil could guess what harebrained scheme they would impel me to carry out. I waited. . . .

The *Yhw* were showing signs of re-

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turning consciousness. One of them groaned and sat up. I kicked him behind the ear and he went back to sleep.

"Forbz," I said suddenly. "How are the statues on the upper levels activated?"

Here it comes, I thought in dismay. The brain hesitated.

"Come with me," it said and began to glide slowly toward one of the exits.

At any minute I expected the *Yhw* to descend on us in hordes but we were unmolested. The tension building up inside me was terrific. If I'd been alive I would have been in a blue funk.

I followed the brain out of the audience chamber into a long corridor.

"How do you move?" I asked the sphere.

"Repulsion and attraction of matter."

"But from what source do you derive your energy?"

"I require very little," the brain explained in a matter of fact voice. "I am almost a self-sufficient unit. The oxygen, food and water that I need are constantly being reconverted inside my sphere of force. What actual energy I expend is more than made up for by the fact that I convert light into matter. Photosynthesis."

"Why do the *Yhw* call you the Master?"

The brain chuckled. "It's a joke of theirs. You see, I am indestructible. They did such a perfect job with me that they couldn't undo it if they tried. However, I am harmless. All my senses except hearing depend on light rays. Then too I'm rather good at problems involving theoretical science. They bring them to me to solve.

"Think! That is the only thing I can do—just think. Sometimes I feel that I'll go completely crazy!"

I shivered. There was an insane note in the brain's voice. It was a weird, a frightening experience, walking beside the floating crystal sphere with the swollen ugly gray wrinkled mass inside, listening to its self-deprecating explanations. There was a touch of paranoia in its manner.

"Why do they call this the Temple of Life?" I asked as much to change the morbid trend of the conversation as anything. The sphere came to a dead stop, giving me what I assumed was a piercing look.

"Because," it said slowly, "it houses the *Yhw's* most precious possession—the source of their immortality!"

I caught my breath. I could feel the concentration of the Watchers and was sure that all five were listening to the sphere through me. The tingling of my senses betrayed their enormous excitement.

IMMORTALITY! The greatest treasure in the universe! A man's life is his most precious possession. I, who had died once, could appreciate that more than any living man.

I hadn't died easily. I had fought against death with every resource in my power. Even now I would have sold my soul for a real existence.

"What is it?" I demanded in a hoarse voice.

"I've never seen it," said the brain of Forbz. "Immortality holds no charm for me. I'll be glad enough when I finally wear out."

"But what is it?" I repeated.

"A lump of some substance not much bigger than your fist," Forbz replied wearily. "That much I've learned. What it is the *Yhw* themselves don't know." He paused.

"Go on, go on!" I cried impatiently.

"There is a legend among the *Yhw*," he resumed, "that ages ago Iannin was lit by a blazing sun. All the people lived on the surface. One of their astronomers discovered that a rogue sun was going to collide with Iannin's sun."

I was listening breathlessly. We hadn't left the corridor. There was still no sign of the *Yhw*.

"Space travel," Forbz was saying, "had not been perfected. There appeared to be no way that the race could escape the cataclysmic explosion that would result from the explosion of the two suns. Then their scientists hit on the plan of building these tunnels deep within the planet's crust.

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"Everyone was pressed into service. The work was completed, the people moved below, the passages sealed off. There was nothing to do but wait.

"The explosion occurred as predicted. The atmosphere, water, everything on the surface was consumed instantly. There were planet tremors, cave-ins. Less than one thousandth of the original population survived.

"They lived in the caves for generations after that since the surface was uninhabitable. Then a scientist called Nedlog discovered the light."

"The light," I repeated.

"Yes. The lump of substance which produces immortality. It gives off brilliant prismatic rays. The substance is not even matter in the accepted sense—some allotropic form of energy possibly. It is these rays which rejuvenate the body cells.

"Nedlog used his discovery to attain undreamed-of power. He gathered the scientists, the wisest men and women, about him and constructed the underworld of Gnoy.

"There he set himself up as an absolute dictator. He and he alone understood the light. It was only through him that his followers could attain immortality. Because every seven terrestial years the cells of the body are completely replaced by new cells the *Yhw* must expose themselves to the light at regular periods.

"Nedlog became a tyrant. He was obsessed with the mania for power. At length the *Yhw* could stomach his oppressions no longer. They killed him.

"For fear that some new tyrant might attempt to seize the light they housed it in a sphere of force similar to the force field which surrounds my brain. It is impossible to reach the light except at certain periods when the field automatically shuts down."

"But the light?" I persisted. "What is it?"

"It emanates from a non-material substance. It has neither grown nor diminished since Nedlog's death. I haven't seen it because the field has not been down since I was brought to Gnoy. It is due to come down any time now.

"That is all that has kept the *Yhw* from beginning their operations against the Galaxy. They haven't been able to get at the light to take it with them."

The sphere's voice fell silent. My mouth was dry, my legs shaky. I was literally weak with excitement. And I kept thinking that the light was the answer. If we could get our hands on the light, the *Yhw* would be helpless—no more dangerous than any other race. Besides we'd have the greatest treasure man could possess.

Just in time I remembered that the *Yhw* might be listening through Forbz as the Watchers did through me. I held my peace but the beginning of a plan was growing in my mind.

I'll say this for the Watchers—they are resourceful old codgers. I could scarcely restrain my jubilance though I don't know why I should have felt jubilant. The light couldn't benefit *me*. It couldn't act on something that didn't exist and I wasn't real. I was just an idea in a lot of people's minds.

CHAPTER VII

Revolt of the Male

FORBZ showed me the crypt which housed the light. It was a great vaulted chamber, the walls entirely opaque. In the center was an enormous shimmering sphere nearly sixty feet in diameter, like a giant soap bubble.

It was transparent and I could see the mechanism which generated the force field from the inside. There was an altar within the sphere on which rested a small curiously-wrought box of some metal resembling lead.

The light, Forbz told me, was inside the box. It would be opened when the force field let down so that the *Yhw* could enter the crypt and bathe in its rays. Then it would be put back in the box. The force field would be raised again, not to be lowered for another seven years.

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From the crypt we took a moving way upward, emerging finally into a mile-long chamber filled with strange robot-like machines, batteries of televisors, screens and loudspeakers.

"This is the control room for the upper world of Gnoy," Forbz explained.

I stared about in amazement. There were three or four *Yhw* hovering about the machines. They watched us apprehensively, then hurried out one of the exits, leaving us in sole possession.

I couldn't understand it. Did they suspect my true nature? Had they guessed that I was as indestructible as Forbz, not helpless as he was. The possibility entered my mind that they had managed to establish some subtle control over me. But I dismissed the idea.

My purpose was running through me too strongly. A definite line of action forming. I knew what I was going to do. "Show me how these machines work," I commanded Forbz.

"They're largely robot-operated," he replied dubiously. "Routine matters are handled by the machines. However anything out of the ordinary is shunted to Central. Usually one of the Lords is on duty there."

He pointed out the bank of screens before the master controls. I sat down in the strange gravity chair, tried the various buttons which he described.

The screens lit up, revealing the upper caverns in minute detail. It was difficult to remember that I was seeing them through the eyes of the statues. I could change the scene at will by activating different statues.

I don't know how long I spent viewing the streets of the buried cities, the lairs of the little people. I was searching for signs of Daja or Mar Kurbi, though I had small hope that either had survived the cannibalistic little monsters of the outer tunnels.

I even invaded the sacred precints of the temple at Fradl, where I saw and heard the high priestess issuing excited orders to a number of the Srethguads. I listened curiously, her words reaching me with bell-like clarity through the transmitting installations in the statue.

A band of runaway men, it seemed, had raided the outskirts of Fradl, seizing weapons and supplies, even carrying off a few women. They were led by a redbearded outlander.

My heart leaped. That could be none other than Mar Kurbi. Trust Kurbi to land on his feet, I thought.

Before I left the high priestess I couldn't resist giving her a jolt, though I suspected that it was Smith who prompted me. "Hear me!" I thundered. "Cease your senseless prattle! I weary of listening to it!"

THE old girl jumped a foot off the floor and began to tremble violently. I couldn't see her face behind the mask but I was willing to bet she was white as chalk. As for the other Srethguads, they were frozen in terror.

Then with a moan the high priestess threw herself down at the foot of the statue and the rest followed her example.

"Hereafter," I said, "you are bound to silence. Not a word must pass your lips until I see fit to lift the ban."

They lay there shivering, stunned by the prohibition. Finally the high priestess plucked up a little courage and, raising her head, said, "But—"

"Silence!" I roared.

They wilted. I switched the screen to another statue, leaving them quivering like so many lumps of raw flesh. I began to search in earnest for Mar Kurbi. Forbz showed me how to enlist the robotic aids and in a matter of moments one of the outer tunnels appeared before me.

It was a fairly large cavern with several exits, before which blockades had been erected. The place swarmed with the brutish escaped men, most of them armed with flame tubes. They had dressed themselves in the short kilts which they girded up like loincloths.

I saw some women among them. Captives, by their attitude—miserable frightened creatures, minus their masks or any apparel for that matter. They'd been given some pretty rough treatment by the aroused males.

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Then I spotted Mar Kurbi. He was still dressed in the black-and-gold uniform of the Eldridge Transport Lines. But he'd grown a huge, bushy red beard. His red hair hung to his shoulders and his uniform was falling to pieces.

It gave me a moment's pause, making me wonder how long we had been in this timeless underworld. "Mar!" I called through the statue. *"Mar Kurbi!"*

I saw him start and stare at the statue in surprise. Then he pulled himself to his feet.

"Mar, this is Barclay, the third navigator. Do you hear me?"

"Good Lord!" he said, striding toward the statue, pushing the gaping men out of his way right and left. "Is that really you, Barclay? Where the devil are you?"

"In the room from where these bloody statues are controlled."

I heard a woman scream. My eyes left the chief tech.

"Mister Barclay! *Mister Barclay!"* the girl's voice cried. I recognized Daja. She was trying to squirm through the milling men. She was wearing a loincloth like the rest of them. She was unmasked and carrying a flame tube.

"Daja!" I burst out. "What happened to you?"

"You're not *dead!"* She was laughing and crying at the same time. "Thank the Lords, you're not dead."

"It's no thanks to them!" I said dryly. "But how did you and Mar get together?"

She was so incoherent that I scarcely could make out what she said. The gist of it was that we hadn't been far from the scene of the ambush when the high priestess had turned her out. She had run into Mar in the tunnels nearby. Mar had managed to break away from the little people too. Together they had sought out a den of escaped men.

MAR KURBI had sold them on the idea of fighting back and had led several raids to get weapons and food and clothing. Gradually their little band had grown until it numbered several thousand.

I didn't have time to ask all the questions I wanted to. Any minute I expected the *Yhw* to burst into the control room. I had to work fast.

"Listen closely," I bade them. "March on Fradl immediately, gathering up every man who'll join you. Arm the menserfs in Fradl—"

"But the women!" Daja protested.

"Never mind the women! They'll lay down their arms without fighting."

"Are you crazy?" Kurbi snorted.

"You can always beat a retreat if they put up any fight," I said, "but they won't! As soon as you've gathered a sufficient force, march to the air lock and wait for me. If I don't show up in a reasonable length of time, destroy the mechanism of the lock and blast off. But the other ships out of commission. Got it?"

The brain, who had been watching and listening silently, said, "Tell him not to bother with the Argus but to seize the special ship that has been built for the Lords. It is robot-operated throughout, requiring only a chief technician and a navigator. There are other improvements."

I repeated I orbz' words through the microphone. Kurbi nodded.

There were some things I would have liked to say to Daja but not over a public address system. As soon as I saw Mar getting the men under way I switched back to the Temple in Fradl.

When I issued my proclamation I didn't think at first they were going to obey me despite their superstitious terror of the Lords. I had to singe a couple of them with the statue's flame throwers to convince them the gods meant business.

All over the city I bellowed my proclamation. *"Lay down your arms, oh women. Arise men, take up the weapons and follow Red Beard!"* I put on quite a show.

The whole city was in a panic. I had to scorch more than one stubborn female before she would submit.

But the men were by far worse. They were brutes, held in check by centuries of grinding suppression. The things

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that took place in Fradl that day give me the cold sweats even now when I remember them.

The brain of Forbz watched silently for the most part, explaining how this or that mechanism could be brought into play when needed. Without its help I never could have accomplished what I did.

One screen, acting under robotic direction, kept Mar Kurbi's forces always under observation. I snatched fragments of conversation with Daja and Mar whenever they were passing close enough to one of the statues.

Their forces were just entering the demoralized city when the lights went out!

Every light in the control room went dark simultaneously, every instrument went dead!

At the same instant the brain of Forbz screamed, "The *lights!* The *Yhw* have cut the power!

The sphere struck the floor with a crash, rolled against something and lay still. I could see the brain glowing faintly, its convolutions limned in a cold phosphorescent light.

CHAPTER VIII

The Casket of Conquest

"QUICK," Forbz cried hoarsely. "There are flame tubes in a cabinet behind you."

The panic in its voice brought me to my feet like a shot. I stumbled across the floor, caroming off some piece of frozen machinery. Somehow I found the cabinet, got it open, rooted around in the stygian darkness of its interior until my hand closed around a smooth cold cylinder.

"Have you found it?" the brain was crying.

"Yes."

"Good! Turn it on me."

I stared at the luminous mass in horror.

"Turn it on me!" It screamed. But I thought its voice was weaker.

I pressed the stud. A blaze of coruscating blue flame lashed out, bathing the sphere in a fantastic display of fireworks.

It actually seemed to drink up the radiant energy being poured over it. It rose slowly into the air, began to move toward one of the exits.

"Keep the flame on me," it commanded harshly. "I'm completely isolated without light. We must get out of here."

I was too astonished to reply. As we reached the lighted corridors a bell began to ring distantly. It went on ringing for a full minute at least. No sooner had it stopped than a voice spoke over a hidden public address system.

"Attention! The force screen about the light is due to be interrupted in a few moments." The bell commenced to ring again.

I looked toward the brain of Forbz questioningly. Then my eyes widened and my mouth flew open.

The sphere was gone!

One minute the brain of Forbz had been hovering in the air just behind me —the next it had vanished like a light when it is turned out. No noise—nothing!

Was I suffering from hallucinations? Could an illusion have illusions? I laughed crazily. Thank heavens, though, the Watchers still had their wits about them.

Of course the drifting sphere moved noiselessly and there were any number of exits into which it could have glided. But what did the bell mean?

Then it dawned on me. The Light of Immortality! The force field about the light was due to come down. The seven-year interval was up and the *Yhw* must bathe in its rejuvenating rays. They were being summoned to the crypt.

I sprinted for the moving ramp, which led downward to the vault where the light was housed. I wasn't sure exactly what I intended doing. I had some idea I suppose of snatching up the box which held the light, tucking it under my arm and making a dash for it like a

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broken-field runner. That sounds ridiculous—but I wasn't alive. There was no reason why the Watchers couldn't imagine me running faster than any of the *Yhw*, dodging, twisting, breaking free finally.

Once I reached the upper levels Mar Kurbi and Daja, with the men, would be waiting for me at the space-lock. We could blast off in the spacer. I could hear a swelling angry murmur as the ramp carried me swiftly downward. It struck me suddenly that something was very much wrong.

I sprang from the ramp into the corridor which led to the crypt. It was jammed with angry Lords. No one paid any attention to me. I spotted Sreth in the press and managed to push my way to his side.

"*Sreth!*" I cried. "What's happened?"

He gave me a startled glance. Then his face blackened furiously. Without a word he reached for me, his fingers like talons. I hit him in the belly with both fists—one, two, a right and a left. It drove him gasping against the wall.

I had slipped the flame tube in my belt. I jerked it out, swung around, facing the angry *Yhw*. But they weren't interested in me!

"The Outlander!" Sreth gasped when he got his breath back. "Seize him!"

I said, "Hold it or somebody's going to get hurt." And I meant it. In the crowded corridor the flame tube would have roasted them to a nice brown crisp. "What's happening in the crypt?"

One of the *Yhw*, who didn't know me, cried, "It's the Master! He's trying to steal the light!"

I was stunned. How could the sphere steal the light when it had no means even to lift the thing?

The Watchers, I figured, were guiding my actions. All I had to do was follow my impulses. I fought my way to the entrance of the crypt. The scene that met my eyes made my hair stand up.

ONE of the Yhw, a truly beautiful woman, was standing by the altar as if petrified. She was holding the casket in her arms, its lid thrown back—and from the box streamed a perfect aurora borealis of light.

But that wasn't what startled me. The woman's entire body was fluorescing vividly, emanating a prismatic aura! I could see right through her, see the boney structure, the shadowy vital organs. It was difficult to make out the expression on her face but I thought she had the stupid look of an idiot.

Beside her hovered the brain of Forbz. There was no one else in the crypt. The *Yhw* for some reason seemed afraid to come past the door, where they had wedged themselves into a tight mass, yelling hysterically at the woman to put down the casket.

She gave no sign that she heard.

Just then Forbz discovered me. "*Barclay!*" he shouted. "*Quick!*"

I sprang forward.

"Take the casket!" the sphere commanded. "I can't control the woman successfully and hold back that mob at the same time! *Hurry!*"

I lifted the casket from the woman's rigid arms. As I did so she toppled forward and lay motionless—*dead!* There was a groan from the *Yhw* in the corridor outside.

The brain was not quite as helpless as it had pretended. The realization shocked me.

Then my mind was diverted by the tremendous sense of vitality which surged through me. It was the rays from the non-material lump of substance in the box. I was fluorescing as the woman had done. Never had I experienced anything like the sense of renewed vigor, of well being, of youth. I was shaken to the core of my being. . . .

"Don't close the lid!" said the sphere. "They may try to trap me again by cutting the lights as they did in the control room. Start for the door, I can drive the *Yhw* back now that I don't have to possess the woman at the same time."

It sent cold chills up my spine but I began to walk toward the raging hysterical Lords who were jamming the exit. As I did so they fell back. I kept walking, the *Yhw* giving way ahead of me. It was incredible.

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One of the Lords pushed into the front ranks. He was carrying a flame tube which he aimed at me. But before he could press the stud he sank lifeless to the floor.

"How did you do that?" I gasped.

"If unconsciousness goes deep enough the involuntary centers of the brain are put to sleep. The heart stops and the man dies." The sphere's voice held an absent note as it concentrated on the mob ahead.

"You can do that?"

"Produce unconsciousness? Yes."

"But how do you keep them back?"

I was beginning to think the sphere wasn't going to reply when it said, "I've only partial control over them. They are too many for me to enter into them and take complete possession as with the woman. I can hold them back but the least relaxation and they would be on us like wolves. Fortunately only a few at a time can come at us through these tunnels!"

We had reached the ramp. The brain was having a hard time controlling the greater numbers that faced us there. Suddenly it screamed furiously, "I'll teach you to defy me!"

One after another the *Yhw* began to stumble and fall. They were dropping dead like flies. It was one of the most vicious exhibitions of fear, of thwarted power drive and malice, I've ever seen. It was sheer insanity.

The *Yhw* fell back in a panic—but they hung on our heels like a school of sharks. They followed us up into a tube terminal, even into the tube itself, but they kept their distance.

A number of things were breaking on my consciousness like a bright revealing light. Or rather they had dawned on the Watchers, much to those gentlemen's consternation.

By this time it was quite obvious that the brain of Forbz had developed megalomaniacal tendencies. It explained a number of things which hadn't made sense heretofore.

The *Yhw* couldn't even have known of the outer Galaxy until Forbz' ship crashed on Iannin. And why should they have set out to conquer the Federation anyway? The *Yhw* had withdrawn from contact with the short-lived mortals on Iannin, creating a world exactly to their taste. Why should *they* want to abandon it?

The answer obviously was that they didn't.

The whole scheme must have originated with the swollen power-hungry brain of Forbz. Stimulated by the *Yhw* scientists it must have developed slowly, testing its new powers cautiously until the *Yhw* had made their final mistake—housing the creature in an indestructible field of force that was generated from inside.

I could feel my mouth dry out. Invincible and deathless, what havoc could such a warped monstrosity wreak once it was loose in space?

WE had entered a gravity lift and were being swept upward. The *Yhw* were still following, drawn after us irresistibly. I couldn't help thinking of the Pied Piper and the rats of Hamlin Town.

They saw their source of immortality being borne off by a monster of their own creation and were powerless to interfere. There was, I suppose, a certain poetic justice about it. Hereafter the *Yhw* would have to come down off their pedestals. They were mortal—no different from the rest of mankind.

I realized that the brain was regarding me with its twin lenses. "Barclay," it said, "this lift leads to the spacelock. Let me warn you not to try any treachery. I may not be able to see into your mind or possess you but I'm not helpless. I can't kill you myself but I can see to it that someone else assassinates you.

"I'm invincible, Barclay. Nothing can stand against me. You saw what happened to those silly *Yhw* who tried to oppose me!"

With a sinking heart I knew that what the brain said was partially true. It was possible to immobilize Forbz temporarily by cutting off the light though such a feat was practically impossible

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since he could control the people around him.

On the other hand there wasn't much he could do to me. But once in space he could easily dispense with my services. There would be thousands of men willing to follow him to the ends of the Galaxy for the sake of immortality.

We popped out of the gravity lift suddenly into the chilly, resounding space-lock like two pieces of toast out of an old fashioned toaster.

"Run!" Forbz screamed, "Run for the spacer."

I ran.

In this vast cavern the *Yhw* could mass their attack. It would be hopeless for Forbz to attempt to control even a small portion of them. I would be trampled, torn to pieces by the angry mob even now beginning to pour out of the lift.

The space-lock was already jammed with men—ugly, sullen brutes armed with the flame throwers. Kurbi. I realized, had arrived and must be in possession of the ship now.

I couldn't see it—for the looming black hull of the Argus was in the way. But as I rounded her stern, I came into full view of the strange vessel with its transparent hull, resting in her cradle. The cradle, like the carriage of a big gun, had been elevated until the ship's nose pointed directly at the outer portal of the lock.

The sphere was speeding ahead of me, clearing a path through the savage man-brutes. Back at the gravity lift I could hear yells of rage, screams and shouts as the *Yhw* tried to fight their way through them. A regular battle must be raging, I realized, but I didn't dare glance back.

The lock of the ship opened as we reached it. It was Daja who opened it. Kurbi was already at the engines.

The girl stared at the brain in amazement. Then I saw a peculiar expression sweep across her face. "Give me the casket!" she told me arrogantly.

I knew what had happened.

"Give her the casket!" the brain of Forbz raged.

I shut the lid with a click. Instantly the rays were extinguished. I tucked it firmly under my arm, glanced about me curiously.

Decks, bulkheads, everything, had been constructed of some clear plastic substance so that it was possible to see from stem to stern of the vessel and beyond to where the half-savage men of the upper levels were battling the *Yhw*.

The ship was ablaze with light, which seemed to emanate from the air itself. There wasn't so much as a shadow. Here and there I could see black rubbery robots going about their duties.

As I expected the brain made its first attempt to do away with me. It had a chief navigator in Daja and a chief technician in Kurbi, both of whom it could control. The robots acted as crew. I was no longer needed.

Without any warning Daja snatched a flame thrower which was thrust into the waist of her loincloth. I hated to do it but there was no help for it.

I hit the girl squarely on the jaw.

She went down and out. Then it was that the extent of the brain's power was revealed. Daja, unconscious, sprang to her feet. Her eyes were closed but she pointed the flame thrower at me and was about to press the stud when I came out of my stupefaction just in time to snatch the weapon out of her hand.

There was something so uncanny about the somnambulistic actions of the unconscious girl that I felt as if the whole thing were a nightmare. With scarcely any pause, she hurled herself at me, her fingers fastening like talons on my throat. I had never felt such strength.

I managed to wrench free. The casket thudded to the deck as I lifted her off her feet, heaved her into a locker and fastened the transparent door so that she couldn't get out.

Instantly she slumped down in one corner as the brain withdrew its malignant influence. I picked up the casket again. A party of *Yhw*, I saw, had won through to the spaceship and were beat-

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ing ineffectually against the hull.

"All right," said the brain sullenly. "You win this time. Blast off. The Lords will bring up equipment to cut through the hull in a moment."

CHAPTER IX

Life Restored

WITHOUT a word I stepped into the gravity lift, which answered for ladders aboard the freakish craft, and was borne swiftly to the control blister. As I did so, I could hear a shrill whine as the great locks overhead began to slide apart. What happened next I don't like to describe.

The air rushed out into space, strangling the thousands of battling men and women in the lock. The *Yhw* were practically wiped out instantly.

I was cold-with horror. But I could hear the brain chuckling in satisfaction as it followed me into the lift. At that moment I think I hated that inhuman monstrosity worse than I hated death.

I signalled Mar Kurbi in the engine room. The answering rumble of the warming jets made the deck vibrate. The star ship began to lift, gently at first, then faster and faster until she shot from the lock like a monstrous projectile. The surface of Iannin was lost instantly in the black nebula.

I could feel the tenuous blackness close around us like a shroud. I glanced distrustfully at the three black smooth robots who comprised the pilots department.

"They answer to vocal commands," the brain explained.

I didn't say anything. Away below me I could see Kurbi in the engine room. Daja still lay unconscious in the locker. A low, warning whistle recalled me to my job. The ship had reached critical acceleration. Below me Kurbi waved to go ahead.

There was a shock as I eased the starship into hyperspace. The needle of the accelerometer spun crazily. There was another shock, more violent than the first. The light glowed red—and slowly died out!

It was the moment for which I had planned and scarcely dared think about lest the brain divine my intentions. The moment of absolute blackness when the ship eased over the edge into hyperspace—that lightless moment when the sphere lay helpless, isolated in its force field!

"*Kurbi!*" I yelled in panic through the speaking tube. "Cut the power!" It was an emergency order that a technician obeys instinctively.

The starship gave a grinding wrench as she dropped back into normal space. I was almost thrown off my feet. I heard the sphere smash into a bulkhead. The stygian blackness was unrelieved. The tubes were dead, every light out, every piece of machinery including the robots immobilized. Outside the nebula intercepted even the faint chill light of the stars.

The only relief anywhere was the palely-glowing sphere that contained the swollen brain of Forbz. The only sound was its pleading voice.

"Mr. Barclay, you're killing me. Mr. Barclay, I must have light—light to see by, to feel, to move. Please, Mr. Barclay, I can make you absolute ruler of the Galaxy. I can give you everything your heart desires."

I said, "Your metabolism is very rapid, isn't it? Like a mole's? You require a tremendous amount of energy to support that force field."

"Yes. Hurry, Mr. Barclay." The voice was weaker, the edge of panic in it stronger. "Dear God, give me light. I promise—I'll promise anything."

I didn't answer.

"Do you hear me?" the brain shouted with that animal note of pain.

I was silent. The brain began to babble. It made wild fantastic promises. It threatened. Gradually every semblance of sanity disappeared from its voice. And all the time it was dimming steadily.

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I sat there in the darkness, waiting—waiting for the last glimmer of light to die out.

The voice of the brain went on and on. It was a horrid thing to hear, this insane raving of a diseased tormented brain. At length I could stand it no longer. I pulled myself to my feet, rolled the helpless sphere into the waste chute, whence it plunged into the blackness of the nebula.

IT is almost impossible to gain admittance to the Watchers' tower on Earth but there was no delay in my case. I was almost shot up to the hundred-and-seventh floor where the conference room is located.

All five of them were there, sitting around the conference table—Ganz and Anders and Deedrik and Heidl and Smit. The sun was streaming through the windows and across the carpet.

"Hello," I said and put the casket on the table. "Here it is."

They scarcely glanced at it.

Ganz scowled up at me from beneath shaggy grizzled eyebrows. "Where have you been?"

"Why," I said puzzled at their attitude, "I stopped off at my quarters to shave and change my uniform but—"

"I mean," shouted Ganz in a rage, "where have you been for the past three years?"

I just stared at him. I had never felt so confused in my life. Finally I managed to blurt out, "But surely, you know. I've been on Iannin—"

"Where the devil is that?"

"In the nebula," I said, beginning to get angry. "B two hundred thirty-six—a rogue planet. But this is absurd. You've been in telepathic control of me all the time. May I point out that I don't exist except in your minds."

"The devil you don't!" he shouted.

I said, "*What!*"

"We lost contact with you right after your ship entered the nebula," Deedrik interrupted. "Are you trying to tell us that you didn't know it?"

I wet my lips, swallowed three or four times. "But—but I don't understand."

Ganz said, "Neither do we! But you've become a reality. Too many people are convinced of your actuality."

"I'm alive?" I said.

"Apparently," he nodded sourly, "we did our job too well. Sit down. You look peaked."

Peaked? What an understatement! I collapsed into a chair.

"Where is the exact line between reality and illusion?" Anders said dryly, putting his fingertips together. "We don't know. The fundamental nature of matter seems to be energy. I say that it seems to be because we can't know what matter or energy actually is. All we can judge it by is its effect on our senses. My boy, you've been having considerable effect on a good many people's senses."

"What Anders means to say"—Ganz broke in impatiently—"is that once you were apparent to all the senses of enough people you crossed the line. We can't explain how—for we don't altogether understand it ourselves. However the fact is irrefutable. You are—you're alive."

"Good Lord!" I said. "The chances I've been taking. When I think—listen, do you have a shot of whiskey handy? No that was back in the twentieth century. A cup of kalone?"

"Will you come down to Earth and tell us what's been happening," Ganz shouted.

"Today I celebrate. This is the day of my birth. Gentlemen," I said, "you are witnessing a miracle. The birth of a man, full grown, like Minerva from the Ear of Jupiter."

I suppose I sounded a little wild. Then I remembered the casket and, throwing it open, danced around in the rejuvenating rays like an idiot.

That did it. All hell broke loose. When the Watchers actually experienced the startling tonic effect of the rays they went as mad as I.

It took me the rest of the day to give them my report. The data was transcribed by dictaphones. It created a sensation. I was expecting a medal at the very least.

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I was still a little dazed—and scared. Lord, how scared I was! Everything that had happened to me in the past scared me all over again—and twice as badly as it had in the first place.

I was shaking.

"And that," I finished, "is absolutely the last time I'll ever take another chance. I quit!"

THEY stared at me until I began to grow uncomfortable.

"Quit?" Ganz repeated, raising his bushy eyebrows. "Come now, Barclay, don't be difficult. You're the best agent we ever had. Didn't we visualize you that way? Strong, resourceful, a positive genius at reconnaissance. Your brain couldn't be read because we imagined you as being absolutely unreadable, impervious to hypnosis. You owe us everything. Don't be ungrateful—"

"That's very kind of you," I said, "But I'm through."

He reared back, regarded me from narrowed eyes.

"It has just occurred to me," he said, "that by the same process with which we created you we could—er—eliminate you. Suppose we began a campaign to convince everyone that you had been killed. It shouldn't be hard to manage—a funeral—they would see you apparently in your coffin."

"Stop it," I yelled and I was already sweating because I knew he could do it. "All right, you win, but at least I want a vacation. I'm going to be married and—"

"Nonsense!" he snapped. "People don't get married any more. Not since four thousand A.D."

"Well," I said, "call it what you like. Daja and I—well, anyway, *that* hasn't been changed and I want a vacation."

"Two weeks!" he said.

And that's all I got. Two weeks! The crusty old dastard!

FOR MEN ONLY

SPACEFLIGHT in its early stages was strictly a stag affair. It had to be—the continued stress of free fall upon the human innards made seasickness seem like a soft-drink hiccup. There was no room for women upon the *Martian Bounce*. So, when Dr. Frances Marion got aboard, thanks to a misspelling of her first name, Captain Eric Gaunt wasted no time ordering her off-ship. But the lady's papers were in order and she refused to go—all of which set off a chain of dramatic events on the *Martian Bounce's* most dangerous mission, which are duly recorded in—

THE VOID BEYOND

A Novelet by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

COMING NEXT ISSUE!

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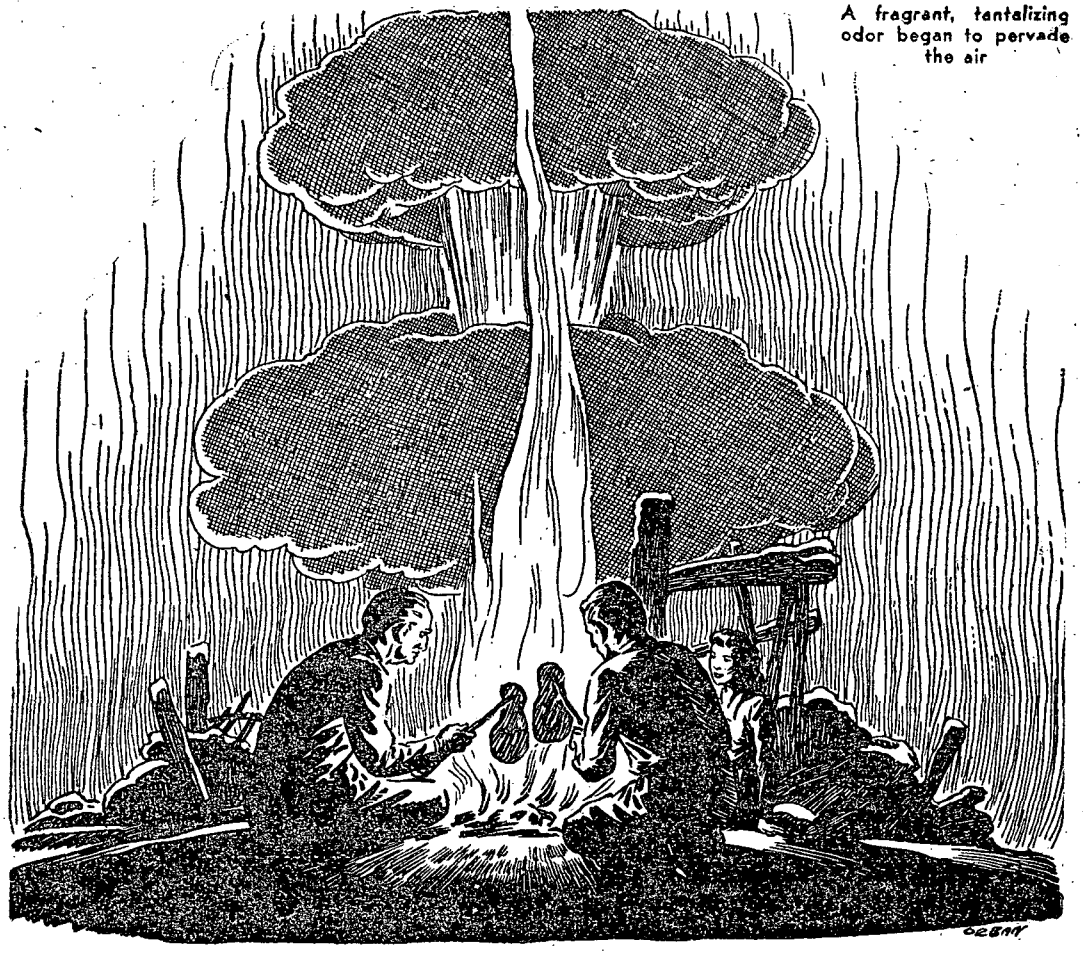

A fragrant, tantalizing odor began to pervade the air

JUST PUSH THE BUTTON

By SAMUEL MINES

To brand-new home, gadgets ashine,
Do not invite the boss to dine,
In case he wants to dine on steak,
When all you have is angel-cake!

THE helicopter wheeled silently over the meadow and, fluttering like a distracted pigeon, began to descend.

"There's your new home, darling," said Harvey Lubell to his bride of four months.

"*Dah*-ling!" Rosalie Lubell uttered a squeal of purest joy and clutched his arm as she tried to see through the plastic windows of the dipping craft.

The anticipatory smile which transfigured her pretty face became just a trifle fixed with strain as the now re-

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vealed dwelling below floated up toward them.

"H-Harvey?"

"Yes, dear?"

"Doesn't it look—just a little—like a shoebox?"

"Shoebox?" He frowned efficiently. "No frills on it, if that's what you mean. No columns, no gimcracks—everything about that house is strictly functional, I want you to know."

"Functional," she said, swallowing. "Oh, yes."

"Hundred per-cent solar," Harvey babbled on happy. "Turns on a mast to follow the sun all day. See that flat roof? Functional. Absorbs sun heat for energy and heating when needed, reflects it on hot days. Home-size atomic-pile engine in the basement, fueled for at least a hundred years. No worries about power supply or bills for the rest of our lives."

"Wonderful," Rosalie said weakly.

But the house didn't look so bad from a level-eye view when the helicopter settled to the grass. It was nicely landscaped at least, with a big stretch of lawn, adequate plantings of shrubbery and some flower beds. It was a little boxy, and it reminded Rosalie of a florist's greenhouse crossed with a gasoline station, but it was home.

"I love it already," she said. "Our first little home."

"Wait'll you see the gadgets," Harvey burbled happily. "No housework, Rosalie, everything practically runs itself. No dusting—the precipitron takes care of that—no cooking—the pneumatic delivery sends complete frozen meals. Why I'll bet you turn out the best dinner tonight Mr. Griffin ever tasted—without a stitch of work."

"Who?" Rosalie asked, dazed.

"Mr. Griffin! My boss."

"Your *boss*? Harvey Lubell—wait, let me get a grip on myself. Harvey, is your boss coming to dinner tonight?"

"Sure, didn't I tell you? Must have forgotten. Anyway he's coming."

"You must have forgotten! *Harvey*, how could you do this to me? Our first night in a new home—I'm not familiar with a thing about it—it's full of new gadgets and you invite your boss to dinner! Oh-h-h, *Harvey!* How *could* you!"

FRIGHTENED by the approaching storm of tears he patted her hastily and inadequately. "I'm a heel, honey. Go on, kick me, or bite me or something. I was so excited about everything I just forgot to tell you. I was telling Mr. Griffin about the house today, that we were taking possession, and he said he'd like to see it and before I thought I just said, 'Sure, why don't you fly out tonight?'

"And he even said you wouldn't be expecting him and I bragged about you and said you were so super that you wouldn't turn a hair, but would whip him up the best meal he'd ever tasted."

His tone was so abject that Rosalie smiled up at him through the starting tears. "I'll t-try," she said.

"Darling, there's nothing to it. The *house* will do everything. Look, come on in and I'll show you!"

He picked her up and rushed her over the threshold, where he kissed her and set her down. The expanse of gleaming varnished plywood, glass and plastic took her breath away. She could understand a little how Harvey's more mechanical mind gloated in all this spic-and-span functionalism. It had beauty, in a way, in the same way that a modern laboratory had its own beauty.

The question was, did she want to live in a laboratory? Harvey insisted that a house was a machine for living, not a relic of overstuffed days when designs and materials were produced to meet different conditions altogether.

"Look at the kitchen!" he crowed, dragging her through a door which opened electronically as they approached. That, she guessed, giving herself an *A* for deduction, was so you wouldn't get into trouble if your hands were full of dishes or things.

The kitchen was all smooth tile and chrome with a number of glass doors and handles which looked like nothing so much as—

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"An old fashioned Automat," she breathed.

"Hardly," said her spouse, annoyed. "This has about as much relation to one of those old food peddlers as the first Sikorsky helicopter has to our Sky Tsar. Look, honey."

He pointed to a chart on the wall, ornate with colored lettering and with a metal stylus dangling on a chain. She came close to discover that it was a complete restaurant menu from soup to nuts. At the top was the name:

SYNTHO-FOODS INCORPORATED

A Meal In A Minute

"All you do," Harvey explained, "is pick your meal for the evening from this menu, which is changed daily. You mark your choices with the stylus and that makes the electrical connection. Then the impulses are sent by radio to the mechanism in the wall here, which translates them into atoms and builds up the food.

"You open these glass doors, take out the plates and pop the whole thing in the electronic oven here—which gives them a dose of short waves—and in exactly ten seconds you have a complete meal for as many people as you want, steaming hot, prepared by master chefs. What could be simpler?"

She blinked at the doors, which eyed her owlishly in return. Somehow she felt a little disturbed by the appalling efficiency of such a machine. A trend like this could go far toward supplanting wives.

"You see why I wasn't worried about dinner?" Harvey said happily. "With this, what could go wrong? There won't even be any dishes for you to wash, for we just pop them into the synthesizer and they're absorbed until they're needed again."

Still in a daze she followed him about while he showed off the house and discoursed fondly upon the mechanical servants of which there seemed literally no end.

"We've got an hour before old—I mean before Mr. Griffin gets here. I'll trim the lawn. Want to take a bath or something, honey?"

She agreed, wishing only to be alone for a few minutes in which to get a grip on herself. In the solar bedroom, with its vast expanse of glass fronting the lawn, she got an acute case of stagefright, feeling like the proverbial goldfish. But she washed her face, put on fresh makeup and sank down on one of the beds. Thank heaven a bed was still a bed. It was comfortable and soft.

A clanking sound aroused her and she got up and went to the window. She saw Harvey beaming fondly at a squat mechanical monster that was rumbling across the lawn on rubber-shod tracks. It looked like a Pershing tank from the second World War but evidently all that machinery had no other function than to clip the grass, for it was cutting a smooth swath as it went along.

It was intelligent though, for it followed the grass and dodged trees and shrubs like a sagacious old hound. It rumbled around the corner of the house and disappeared.

After awhile Rosalie went to the front door to look for Harvey. A swishing sound in the sky drew her gaze and she saw a helicopter dropping toward her. *Mr. Griffin!* Stagefright overcame her again and she called Harvey in panic.

He came around the corner and spotted the helicopter. "Here he comes," he informed her unnecessarily. "Did I tell you the special reason I asked him out? I'm being considered for sales manager. Got to impress the old boy with our efficiency tonight."

Rosalie closed her eyes, crossed her fingers and offered up a silent prayer. The helicopter landed. The jets ceased their hissing and the wings came to a stop. From its belly, Mr. Griffin descended, to an inaudible fanfare of trumpets.

He marched up the new-laid flagstone walk toward them, upon his features an expression stern yet benevolent, like a king visiting one of his lesser nobles. On the doorstep Harvey and Rosalie made the appropriate picture of welcome, his arm about her, both abeam with smiles for the visiting royalty.

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INTO this lovely picture dashed the Pershing tank. It hurtled around the corner of the house on one track, gulping grass, its speed mechanism gone haywire. Like a two-ton streak it flashed across the lawn, leaving a smooth pathway of cut grass behind it, leaped the flagstone walk and swallowed Mr. Griffin in a mighty gulp.

There was hardly time for one scream from Rosalie before Mr. Griffin disappeared into the maw of the monster. A second later he was spewed out the back.

He was green. There was not a stitch of clothes on him, every thread having been efficiently shredded by the mower. He was evenly covered from crown to toe with a fine green paste of chopped grass, which—like creamed spinach—clung to him as closely as his own skin. And he was bellowing as lustily as a hungry lion.

"Good heavens!" Harvey recovered first. He broke from Rosalie and charged down the walk. He reached Mr. Griffin and flung himself down on his knees beside him. "Are you hurt, sir? Are you hurt?"

"Get me *out* of here!" Griffin was roaring. "What hit me? Did you get his number? Get me some clothes! What *is* this?"

Evidently he was unhurt, for his roars were pure indignation rather than pain.

"Come on, sir, get up." Harvey tugged at him.

A clanking roar issued increasing warning from around the corner of the house. Harvey paled. "It's coming back, sir. Let me help you up."

The Pershing tank swooped around the corner of the house again. It shot toward both men. Griffin saw it and scrambled to his feet with alacrity amazing in so bulky a man. He and Harvey started to run in opposite directions, came together with a crash and went down, flying apart from the contact. The monster charged between them and swooped around the house again.

This time there was no hesitation. Both Harvey and Mr. Griffin picked themselves up and dashed for the sanctuary of the doorway, which Rosalie was holding down. They slammed the door behind them and listened, panting, to the clankings and roarings outside.

"What *was* that, Lubell?" Mr. Griffin demanded, the horror of his ordeal still upon him but mustering as much dignity as a man clad only in chopped grass could.

"That was a lawnmower, I'm told," Harvey replied weakly.

"A *lawnmower!*" Griffin exploded. "That's the first maneating lawn mower I ever saw! Lubell I ought to have your head for this. Get rid of that thing. It'll take a mighty fine dinner to make up for this! Young man, have you any clothes for me?"

"Brave new world!" Rosalie murmured. "The bathroom's the first door on your right, Mr. Griffin. What do you like best for dinner?"

"*Steak!*" Mr. Griffin barked, disappearing through the doorway. "Steak and fresh corn—on the cob!"

Harvey was busy at the phone, telling the mower company a few things about their product that were new to them. But presently he followed her into the kitchen, mopping his brow.

"What a ghastly experience!" he said shuddering. "It'll be a miracle if J.G. forgives me for this. His dignity is almost as precious to him as his bankroll."

"We'll give him the best dinner we can," Rosalie said, "and hope that gets him into a mellower mood. Did you say these atomic gadgets were foolproof?"

She jabbed the stylus into the holes opposite the items wanted.

"Fruit cup, steak, corn, asparagus—he didn't ask for that but we'll toss it in—coffee, Roquefort, ices—mmm, what brand of cigars does he smoke? That okay darling? Nothing fancy—just a simple substantial meal like his mother used to make him when he was a boy."

"That's about it," Harvey said. "Touch the stylus here and that ends your order and sends it. Now watch."

A signal light winked on above one of the glass doors and in rapid succession in a number of the others. The

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doors opened. Rosalie reached in and withdrew a plastic plate on which a thin flattened greyish mass reposed unappetizingly.

"Ugh," she said. "What's this?"

"Don't go by that," Harvey said. "Pop it into the electronic oven here. In ten seconds it will be a juicy steak, cooked just right."

"How about the fruit cup?"

"That goes in here. It won't cook—in fact it will come out iced."

She slid the plates into the oven and closed the porcelain door. A red light flashed.

"When it goes out it's done."

They waited until the light winked out. Then Rosalie opened the oven and began taking out plates and lining them up on the work table. Each one contained the same item, a round golden-brown angel-cake. There were ten plates—ten angel cakes.

EYES popping, Harvey stared at the product of the electronic age. Rosalie, not quite as surprised as he, observed them more calmly but with something of the tragic despair which Helen of Troy must have felt when her kinsmen were battering down the walls of her lover's city.

"Angel-cakes!" Harvey muttered.

"You catch on quick," Rosalie observed. "What do we do now, mastermind? The boss asked for steak—remember? You think these angel-cakes will make him angelic?"

"No, no—this is terrible." For the first time his aplomb seemed on the verge of deserting him. "We've got to do something. Can't you rustle up some scrambled eggs or something?"

"Scrambled eggs? Where am I going to get them? Do you have chickens out back? Or are you still depending upon this mechanical marvel? I think it's got its wires crossed or something."

"Wires crossed!" Harvey snapped his fingers. Some of the dazed look went out of his eyes. "That's *it!* We're not licked yet, honey!"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, alarmed.

"There's a nuclear pile in our basement, serving as our power supply," he said. "That thing can change the structure of atoms—rearrange them. Why can't I change this angel-cake into steak? All I need to know—where's that instruction book?"

"Harvey—" Rosalie faltered. "Darling, do you think you ought to monkey with that thing? After all you're not an engineer."

"Don't need to be," he said impatiently, riffling the pages of the book. "Just takes a little common sense. "All I have to do is change the hook-up of the pile so that instead of putting out heat and power energy it starts to knock down the atoms in these angel cakes and make new atoms out of them. Where—ah, here it is—'alternate wiring diagrams for special nuclear effects.' H'mmm."

"Lubell! *Lubell!*" Mr. Griffin's bull-like tone shattered the peace and quiet of the kitchen. He pushed through the automatically opening door. "Ah, there you are. How do I look?"

He had bathed himself free of the grass and was attired in a new paper suit, automatically delivered from a machine in the bedroom. He looked like the man who had first arrived except for a new and wary gleam in his eyes. That gleam said he had been surprised and defeated but he was not a man to be taken unaware again. He was prepared now, let all beware!

"You look wonderful, J.G.," Harvey said absently.

"What's *this?*" Mr. Griffin peered at the lined up plates. "Cakes? Been doing a little baking, Mrs. Lubell? My heavens, what do you want with so many?"

"A little overproduction," Rosalie said hastily. "Come into the living room and get comfortable, Mr. Griffin. I'll get you a drink. Hope I know how that automatic ice-cube gadget works."

"That reminds me," Griffin said. "You were going to show me all the gizmos in this mechanical house. I don't think my nerves are up to it. Not after that experience with your lawnmower. By gad, Lubell, I ought to cut your salary for that!"

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"There's always a price to pay for advancement," Rosalie said hastily. "I'll get you that drink and you'll feel better."

"Only thing that can make it up is a real old-time dinner," J.G. rumbled. "It better be a good one, young woman, or I'll demote your husband to office boy!"

She got him out of the kitchen finally and the harried Harvey heard the rumble of his voice from the living room. You had to hand it to the old boy, Harvey admitted. He had barely landed when he was subjected to an experience which might well have shattered the nerves of a younger man.

But J.G. was tough. He had already shrugged it off. He was telling an off-color joke now to Rosalie. Harvey could hear his choking snorts of laughter and Rosalie's polite titter. Now to get these blasted angel cakes into the cellar.

He got them down finally and stacked up near the squat massive little pile of slumbering power. The pencil-sized bar of uranium that fueled the engine would fill all normal demands for power far beyond their lifetimes, Harvey knew—or, if jiggled into releasing said power all at once, it would remove most of the state from the map in one beautiful burst. But there were all kinds of safety features built into it. No matter what he did he couldn't make it explode.

With an eye on the wiring diagrams in the instruction book he got to work with a socket wrench and Phillips screwdriver. Thank goodness no soldering was necessary or he'd never have been able to do it.

"Detach red lead from A and cross over B-one to connect at C. H'm. This projects fan-shaped area A-A to C within whose radius the nuclear reactions take place."

So far, so good. Now to arrange the cakes so that they all came within the prescribed zone. He set them in place and pressed the switch, then stepped back to mop his forehead with a handkerchief.

A greenish glow seemed to be spreading from the machine. It lapped like spreading water at the angel cakes, climbed their sides to submerge them in a fluorescent shimmering. The circular outlines grew fuzzy, like a picture going out of focus. They seemed to crumble and begin to melt. Then all the cakes began to droop and flow into new lines and shapes.

"Eureka!" Harvey mopped his forehead excitedly. "It's working. They're changing—into something." The question was—what?

BUT the answer to the question was abruptly postponed. A thin curl of smoke spurted from the atomic furnace. Instantly, on a panel fastened to the wall above it, a red light began to flash hysterically. A bell opened its strident clamor in the basement. And then with an ear-shattering whine, a fire siren on the roof of the house began to wail. It climbed rapidly up the scale until it was shrieking *"help!"* across the countryside with an intensity that tore the nerves to shreds.

From above came two double thumps as J.G. and Rosalie leaped to their feet.

"Harvey?" Faintly came his wife's call.

Abruptly flame ran along the multiple-colored wires of the atomic engine. A thin fan of it crawled greedily from some crevice in the machine and began to dart about like the tongue of a cobra. The awful frying sound and smell of insulation filled the basement.

Panic clawed at Harvey. He stared, eyes popping, for an awful second in which he seemed unable to move. A sputtering grew rapidly in the furnace. Would it explode in spite of the safety measures? In his mind came unbidden a picture of that awful mushroom-shaped cloud, soaring eighty miles above the honeymoon house, with the three of them, J.G., Rosalie and himself vaporized and dancing lightly atop it.

"Got to get out of here!" he muttered.

A sudden burst of flame leaped higher. Harvey looked about wildly. Like a woman who seizes her most cherished possessions before fleeing a burning house, Harvey looked for something to save. With a swoop, he

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caught up three or four of the changing angel cakes and, clutching them madly to his breast, dashed for the cellar steps.

Behind him as he ran the atomic furnace disintegrated in a blinding flow of molten metal and flame, which crawled like lava over the concrete floor, setting fire to everything combustible in its wake.

Smoke poured up the stairway with Harvey. Choking, he met Rosalie and Griffin at the top. They choked and coughed too.

"What happened?" she screamed.

"Get *out!*" he yelled. "The atomic furnace—it may blow!"

They dashed for the door, shot through it like orange pips squeezed between the fingers. On the lawn they were nearly intercepted by the patrolling lawn mower but dodged it and ran headlong across the grass.

Smoke poured from the building and flame now licked with disheartening rapidity through the billows. The siren still shrieked madly overhead and they could hear other sirens round about the country, picking up the alarm and spreading it.

"Harvey, what *happened?*"

"I don't know! It started to burn!"

"Is that your foolproof house?" J.G. panted. "A machine for living?"

Abruptly he stopped, wheezing. "I can't run any more! Just as soon be blown up as die—from heart attack!"

They all stopped, turned to face the spectacle now, spewing flames from every window. But the safety controls were holding it down and there was no explosion.

"I guess we're safe," Harvey muttered.

A fast approaching wail in the sky transformed itself into a firecopter. It swooped over the burning building and dropped an extinguisher bomb. Flames puffed out abruptly and dense clouds of smoke boiled upwards.

More bombs were dropped and more firecopters arrived. Special atomic emergency units arrived and landed. Firemen in heat and radiation-proof suits rushed into the house. There ensued much banging and hammering and yelling. The smoke obscured most of it.

Then the firemen came scurrying out. "Look out! The walls are going!"

Sadly, Harvey Lubell watched his brand new cottage buckle and collapse.

Twenty minutes later the fire was, to all appearances, out. Then approached the Fire Chief, a rotund but grim-faced character with a basilisk gleam to his eyes which said that so far as he was concerned all men were born arsonists.

Pad and pencil came forth. "All right now, how did it start?"

One hour and ten thousand questions later they were alone again on the lawn. In the distance the General Pershing lawn mower stood disconsolately, having been somehow shut off by the super-efficient firemen. Neighbors had offered shelter for the night which was unhappily refused.

"We'll go into town to a hotel, thank you," Rosalie told them.

Now they stood, J.G., Rosalie and Harvey and looked at the blackened mess.

"I'm hungry," Griffin announced.

HARVEY stirred. He was about to say something nasty about people who thought only of their stomachs at a time like this, but remembered that Griffin was his boss.

"I saved the steaks anyway," he said.

"Steaks? Well, let's eat 'em," Griffin said. "No use letting them go to waste, is there?"

"I'll get them," Harvey said gloomily.

He moved toward the bush under which he had chucked them. Then another blow struck him. How did he know they were steaks after all? He had seen only the beginning of some kind of change. Suppose they had changed into paper napkins or aluminum coffee pots or rubber tires? Why did he have to shoot off his big mouth, anyway?

"I'm starved," Griffin was grumbling behind him.

Harvey went down on his knees, hauled forth the plates. His eyes popped.

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They were steaks, all right, four of them. But they were raw!

He brought them out. "They're raw," he said.

"Raw? How the devil are we going to cook them?" Griffin bellowed. "By the rings of Saturn, Harvey, this is the last straw! You get me out here to show me the latest electronic marvel—your dream house! You have me run over and swallowed up by a grass-eating monster the minute I get here! You have me burnt out and nearly blown up in an atomic fire.

"And now you want to starve me to death before I can get back home or to a restaurant! By gad, this is the last straw! Of all the incompetent, rattle-brained nincompoops you take the cake—the angel-cake! How I could ever have been weak-minded enough to consider you for an important job like sales manager, I'll never know! You—you flibbertigibbett! We're through!"

He started to stamp off towards his helicopter. Something like the calm of desperation settled over Harvey. He was fired, his house was burned down, it would be a miracle if he still had a wife after this day's work.

"Just a minute, J.G.," he said.

"Bah!" said J.G.

"Come back here, you old windbag!" Harvey roared.

"What? *Sput*—" Griffin whirled.

"You heard me," Harvey said coldly. "You're a windbag and a bully. You think more of your stomach than other people's troubles. But don't run off hungry. Come back here and we'll feed you."

"On what—raw steak? No thanks!"

"Not raw steak—broiled steak."

"How?" Griffin stabbed a contemptuous finger toward the house. "Your shortwave broiler is buried in that pile of junk."

Harvey put his hand in his pocket, brought out his jack-knife.

"Remember these from your Boy Scout days, J.G.? A pre-atomic model of the common pocket knife. No atoms, no wires, no power. Just a carbon steel blade. Enough to split up a few pieces of wood, make an old-fashioned bit of combustion."

He strode toward the house and after some poking around in the ruins, dragged forth what appeared to be the remnants of a limed-oak coffee table. Working rapidly he laid a fire, corn-crib style, slicing off long slivers for kindling. Half an hour later, by rubbing two sticks together he managed to start a blaze.

"Now while that burns down to coals I'll cut some greenwood forks to hold the steaks," he said.

Twenty minutes later they were all seated around the fire, holding chunks of steak on their forks over the glowing coals. A fragrant tantalizing aroma began to pervade the air. J.G. drooled.

"Steak broiled over an oak fire," he crooned. "I haven't tasted anything like this in forty years."

His first bite confirmed his memories. "Gad, Harvey," he mumbled through a full mouth, "you're a genius. I take back all those hard things I said about you, boy. This takes me back—"

Rosalie, her eyes shining, looked at her husband. He shrugged, leaned over, whispered in her ear.

"What would the old boy say if he knew these steaks were made out of angel-cake?"

Rosalie shook her head. She was thinking of something else.

"The job's yours," Griffin was saying. "You showed resourcefulness today, son, and a wonderful determination in the face of obstacles and discouragements that would have stopped a lesser man. Be in at nine tomorrow morning."

Rosalie was mentally planning their next house—a Cape Cod cottage with an open fireplace and not an atomic gadget in the place. Should she have electric lights, or kerosene lamps? She decided on electric lights. After all there was no use carrying this thing too far.

"Brave new world," she murmured.

"What was that, darling?" Harvey asked, swallowing the last of his steak.

"Nothing. I was just wondering what SYNTHO-FOODS are having on the menu for tomorrow," she said.

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Michael Lance had a Utopia for sale, a veritable Eden for those who could afford it, so he offered it to a—

RESTRICTED CLIENTELE

THE young man was tall and well-built. His clothes were good quality plastic, overlaid with a tweed pattern, were of the cut being worn by young men only a few years out of Yale. His hair was clipped short in the space-crew cut then popular at Yale. His face was almost handsome by cine-tele standards but there was an expression of serious concentration seldom seen in so

Lance was looking out of the screen, smiling

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young a man. The blue bar in his lapel indicated one year of service as a voluntary space cadet.

On the other side of the Martian crystal-wood desk Hector Almeric sat, reading the letter the young man had brought. Finishing it he glanced up.

"You come highly recommended," he said. "There aren't many men of your age who could produce a letter of introduction from the president of the First Galactic Bank. I see my friend Gregory also mentions that you're a Yale man."

"Yes, sir."

"What year?"

"Class of fifteen, sir."

"Class of fifteen, eh," mused Hector Almeric. "You've been out three years. I graduated from Yale myself—class of twenty eighty-five."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Gregory told me you were Yale."

Hector Almeric smiled. It was an expansive smile, the one that looked out from the photographs which went to the telepapers whenever he made a contribution to charity. "I suppose," he said, "that he also told you I'm always willing to give a hand to any man from Yale? What's your name?" He glanced at the letter.

"Michael Lance," the young man supplied before he found it in the letter.

"Oh, yes. Now, what can I do for you, Michael? The promise of a job when your Five Years of Freedom are up?"

"No, sir," Michael Lance said. "I want exactly thirty minutes of your time. I have something to sell—but I think you'll find it is something you've wanted all of your life."

HECTOR ALMERIC studied the young man with a gaze accustomed to judging men, then nodded. He pressed the button on his inter-office televisor and the screen revealed a voluptuous-looking blonde.

"Don't interrupt me for the next thirty minutes," he said, "but let me know when the time is up." The girl nodded and the screen faded to a milky gray.

The financier took a cigar from the humidor on his desk and placed it in his mouth. He drew on it and a ribbon of smoke drifted up. When it was burning evenly he turned his attention to the young man.

"What are you selling?" he asked.

The young man leaned forward. "I represent the Galactic Realty Corporation," he said.

There was no visible change but Hector Almeric was suddenly more alert. "Galactic Realty? Who are the owners?"

The young man flushed. "As a matter of fact I own two-thirds of the stock myself—final transfer, of course, being subject to the success of my plan within the next two years. The remainder is owned by Mr. Gregory, who has also agreed to finance the corporation."

"So?" Hector Almeric was silent for a minute, then he chuckled. "I like to see a young man with the ambition to cut a niche for himself in the Galaxy. Too many of them today just sit around belly-aching or they join the Liberals.

"But it's going to have to be some trick, young man. As of yesterday the World Developing Corporation, of which I am Chairman, owned seventy per-cent of the useable land in the Galaxy and held an option on another twenty per-cent. The remaining ten per-cent is on Pluto and its use is not yet practical. Now—what is your trick?"

"The trick is in the word *useable*. But before I go into that, I'd like to run through the historical background concerning my idea." Michael Lance placed his plastic briefcase on his lap and removed some papers. "I'm aware that you know the facts I'm about to cover. But I believe it essential to refresh your memory on the particular developments which are pertinent to my plans."

"It's your thirty minutes," Hector Almeric said. He was a methodical man himself and admired the quality in others.

"As we know," Michael Lance continued, "the twentieth century was a period of continuous war. Most of the world's wealth was controlled by about three thousand families, who were never able to achieve complete cooperation

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with each other.

"There was a large middle class which operated under two major conflicting illusions. One was that they were the real masters of the earth and the other was that each of them had the opportunity of becoming one of the small group owning the wealth."

"Well put," the older man said. "I'm glad to see that Yale still knows how to teach history."

"Then," continued the young man, "there was a still larger group of workers, proletarians they were sometimes called. They were freely permitted one illusion, which was that they were the equal of everyone else and therefore had equal opportunity of becoming wealthy."

"In theory that was true," Almeric said, smiling.

"Perhaps. But its main purpose was to keep most of them lulled into inactivity. A small group of the workers, however, had cultivated another illusion—that they could overthrow both the middle class and the wealthy. This illusion was carefully nourished by the wealthy for it served two purposes.

"It was an unattainable goal, which absorbed the energies of the more rebellious workers, and it acted, through fear, to make the middle class use their energy in protecting the wealth of the ruling class. It was a rather brilliant way of balancing various mass strengths."

Hector Almeric nodded encouragingly and waited for the young man to continue.

"There were also a number of inferior races and religious groups which were politely called minorities. They were permitted a certain freedom in agitating for equality and were occasionally allowed temporary gains. But so many divisions and sub-divisions only meant that the political strength of the people was so much comet dust."

"Comet dust?" Almeric interrupted.

MICHAEL LANCE flushed. "Sorry, sir," he said. "That's a bit of slang, popular in the university now. It means that their energies were widely scattered."

"I see." Hector Almeric made a mental note of the phrase. His daughters considered him old-fashioned and he was continually trying to prove otherwise.

"Politically," the young man said, "those who controlled the wealth were divided into three camps. Some were what was called Fascists, believing in ruthlessly despoiling the earth for their own private ends. Others wanted everything to continue just as it had been during their lives. They were known as Conservatives. A small number advocated a limited generosity toward the middle class and the workers. They were rather loosely called Liberals.

"The middle class was equally split between conservative policies and a slightly more radical liberalism. The workers were roughly divided, with many sub-divisions, between those who insisted that they lived in the best of all possible worlds, those who wanted a benign socialism and those who wanted what they called a dictatorship of the proletariat.

"Known as Communists, this last group claimed that theirs was the only true socialism. In reality they were motivated chiefly by a desire to exchange places with that outer political fringe of the wealthy."

"I presume," Hector Almeric said, "that you've seen the fallacies in the ancient theories?"

"Of course. Because of the rivalry, however, between the individuals controlling the wealth, the twentieth century was almost constantly at war, climaxing in the Atomic War of nineteen seventy. Within a relatively short time fifty per-cent of the population was destroyed and a large part of the world, including all of the large cities, was rendered unfit for habitation.

"The remaining populations reverted to an apathetic pastoral existence. It was fifty years before one man found a way of clearing the earth of all radiation."

"That was my grandfather," Hector

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Almeric said with pride. "Alfred Almeric."

"I know," Michael Lance said. "Your grandfather's discovery had the effect of restoring hope. Cities were rebuilt and industries were started again. But this time the old mistakes were avoided. By twenty forty world government was a reality. In the same year colonization and development of the other planets was started. By twenty sixty the United Galactic States were functioning smoothly under one Chairman. That method has continued to improve up to the present."

"Bringing us, I imagine," Hector Almeric said dryly, "to your proposition?"

"Bringing us nearer at least," the young man said with a smile. "Briefly—at the present time, we have three classes—the Manuals, the Intellectuals and the Investors. The wealth of the Galaxy is owned, of course, by the Investors, now numbering fifty persons."

"Seventy-five are permitted," Almeric reminded him. "Although I will admit that it is becoming more difficult for a young man to become an Investor. There have been but two additions in the past twenty years, whereas ten Investors have died."

The young man nodded. "As the Investors own the wealth it is only natural that they are also the government—thus making sure that their investments are protected."

"Not only that," Almeric said. "There is also the factor that we are the only ones capable of ruling on a practical and businesslike basis. You must have read my father's book, 'The Sanity of the Practical Elite.' I believe it's required reading at Yale."

"A wonderful book," Lance said eagerly. "I have also read your fine monograph, 'The Immortality of the Elite.'"

Hector Almeric made a modest gesture with his cigar.

"The Investors," continued Michael Lance, "automatically constitute the Board of Directors of the United Galactic States. You are the present Chairman. Since there can never be more than seventy-five Investors at any given time, cooperation is much easier than in the old days. Each Investor has his own monopoly so there can be no competition. You consider the Galaxy merely an extension of your businesses."

"The efficiency of this has, I think, been shown," Almeric said. "We have not had a single war since the system was started."

"True. You were also aware of other weaknesses in the old system so that none of your power and only a quarter of your wealth can be inherited by your children. New Investors can come only from the children of the Investors or from those children of the Intellectuals who are able to produce a new invention or discover new fields of exploitation during their Five Years of Freedom between leaving the University and the date for their service to begin. Failing to do so they become office or laboratory workers and are classified as Intellectuals."

HECTOR ALMERIC dropped his cigar into a dematerializing tray on his desk and watched it fade. "I presume," he said, "that the name of your company indicates you are making your bid for Investorhood through the second method?"

"Not exactly, sir. But, to continue, there are also the Manuals, constituting"—he glanced at the papers on his lap—"ninety-seven point six per-cent of the population. They are assigned their work, even as the Intellectuals, but instead of salaries they are furnished those things necessary to keep them working.

"If they are unable to work or do not perform their work with enthusiasm they are assigned to Charity Dormitories after being sterilized. This last method has done wonders in raising work efficiency."

"I see you've read my pamphlet on 'The Political Aspects Of Sex.'" Almeric said.

The young man nodded. "Several times," he said. "A brilliant piece of

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work. Since there is a danger in one aspect of the rigid class system, the children of Manuals can become Intellectuals if they show genius or near-genius ability in the tests conducted at the time they finish their sixth year of school. In that event they continue with school instead of going to work."

"And the Investors pay all costs, don't forget," Almeric said.

"Of course. I believe this pretty well sums up the salient aspects of our civilization—everything except the Liberals."

"Ah, yes, the Liberals." Hector Almeric spoke softly but again there was a definite change in his attitude.

"All periods have had people who were dissatisfied with the systems under which they live," Michael Lance said. "During the twentieth century the only ones with any strength were the Socialists and Communists. These groups were completely eliminated by your grandfather and his contemporaries. But the Liberals of the older days were a weak group, opposed to violence, incapable of unity of action, so they were permitted to live. That was an error."

"It was," Almeric admitted. "My grandfather, however, thought there was a good reason for permitting the Liberals to live. Many of them were scientists and scholars who were needed."

"It was still short-sighted," Lance said. "While they were harmless then this is no longer true. Within the past ten years the Liberals have become a strong underground movement, united under one leader. They believe in the social responsibilities of scientists and other Intellectuals, in equal distribution of wealth, in equal participation of all, in leadership *for* the masses rather than *of* the masses—and in the ruthless elimination of all Investors."

"You seem to have made an unusual study of the Liberals," Hector Almeric said. His hand was near a recessed button on his desk. "Why?"

"Since I was sixteen," Michael Lance said, "I've known I was going to become an Investor. Every minute of my time has been devoted to that purpose since I was determined not to make the mistakes my father did."

"Your father?"

"My father is Alvin Harlow Lance. He was in your class at Yale. He was interested in many intellectual pursuits and was three-dimensional chess champion. He was also interested in social activities."

"Alvin Harlow Lance," exclaimed Almeric. "I remember him. He was the most popular man on the campus."

"Exactly," Michael Lance said grimly. "As a result, while he discovered the Fifth and Sixth Properties of radium, he did not do so until his Five Years of Freedom were over so that the patents belonged to the Board of Investors. Consequently he is still an Intellectual, in the employ of the Henderson Laboratories. I have made no such mistake."

"I see," Almeric said thoughtfully. "But what do the Liberals have to do with this?"

"I have decided to become an Investor—and to remain one. The only threat to Investors lies with the Liberals. As long as they exist there is a threat to the Board. With all wealth and all power in the hands of less than seventy-five people, with no buffer group such as the middle class of old days, a revolution becomes successful by removing that small group of men."

"We're pretty well protected," Almeric said.

"But is it adequate? What, for example, would keep a Liberal from becoming an Investor and striking from within?"

ALMERIC laughed with tolerance. "My boy," he said, "you still have a lot to learn. If a Liberal were to succeed in becoming an Investor you can be sure he would cease being a Liberal. Only those without wealth are willing to share all wealth."

"How can you be sure?"

"You can't change human nature," Almeric said. "When you're as old as I am you'll understand that better."

"Perhaps," the young man said. "But

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the Liberals are aware that they can win by destroying the few Investors. Last year two Investors were assassinated. This year they may strike at all of you. Even the uncertainty of where and when they'll strike is one of their weapons."

"You might be interested to know," Almeric said with a smile, "that I had lunch yesterday with the Directors of Political Control, the Federal Bureau of Insignificants and Heresy Eradication. They've been doing a great job."

"I'm sure of it, sir, but I believe there is a limit to what can be accomplished through propaganda, the endless watching for clues in the unimportant actions of everyone, the execution of those who fail to react properly to propaganda. Have they learned how to rid the Galaxy of Liberals?"

"Not yet," Almeric admitted, frowning. "They do know that the present leader took the leadership away from old Anderson a year ago, just before Anderson was killed resisting arrest. They know he's a scientist. They believe that he's opposed to assassination but have not yet learned the alternative he's urging on the Liberal Council. They've also learned the sign by which he can be recognized by any Liberal. This should help lead us to him."

"The sign?"

"Yes. It's a pulling at a forelock of his hair. I believe this is supposed to be a humorous reference to the ancient times when slaves and serfs pulled at their forelocks to indicate their slavery."

"Sounds more romantic than practical," Lance said.

"Exactly. That is one of the reasons why they can never win."

"Still," Lance said slowly, "it's a race between the attempt to kill several thousand men who are underground and the attempt to kill fifty men who are out in the open." He paused and glanced up. "I can cut the period of uncertainty to two months and *guarantee* victory thereafter."

"How?"

"What is the exact situation now?" Lance asked, ignoring the question.

"The Liberals are strong, most of them unknown despite the fact that the police have concentrated on them for years. They have assassinated two Investors and are planning to strike at all of you. There is no place in the Galaxy to escape. Mars and Venus, the only other habitable planets, have colonies on them and therefore there must be Liberals there."

Almeric nodded.

"In addition to the fear of assassination," Lance continued, "there is no place in the Galaxy for an Investor to be comfortable. No place to get away from the rocket fumes which are poisoning the air. No place, in spite of ghettos and restricted areas, to get away from the inferior races, since many of them are your servants. No place an Investor can completely relax, free of fear, contamination, unpleasant people. Is this to be the price of superiority?"

"You have an answer to all this?"

"I have."

"*If* you do," Almeric said thoughtfully, "there is no doubt but what you'll become the fifty-first Investor. But some pretty good brains have worked on it and failed. What is your plan?"

"Do you know the minor planets Ceres and Vesta?"

Almeric nodded. "Between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. I believe Ceres is slightly less than five hundred miles in diameter while Vesta is only a little more than two hundred."

"Close enough," Lance said. "The Galactic Realty Corporation owns both planetoids. I filed claims on them a year ago and since there was no challenge they were automatically transferred yesterday."

"But why?" Almeric asked, frowning. "We surveyed them years ago. There are no worthwhile minerals on either of them. While the atmosphere and climate are fine they are impractical for other reasons. Ceres, I seem to remember, has a gravity only one-thirtieth that of the Earth. A man would have to wear gravity shoes constantly to remain on the ground."

Michael Lance smiled as he pressed

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the sides of his ring and looked at the time. He stood up. "Twenty-nine minutes and forty-one seconds, sir," he said. "Mr. Almeric, the answer to all of the problems of the Investors lies on the planetoid Ceres. Will you join the other Investors and myself on an inspection tour tomorrow?"

Hector Almeric glanced again at the letter on his desk. "I have never known Dwight Gregory to act impulsively in thirty years and he seems to think you have something," he said. "I'll go."

"Thank you, sir." There was eagerness in Michael Lance's grin as he held out his hand. "We'll be leaving at ten tomorrow morning—in Mr. Gregory's space cruiser."

THE gleaming space ship dropped softly through scattered clouds, sparkling with a life of their own, and the rocket blasts eased it to the ground. The outer door swung open and Michael Lance jumped to the ground. He was followed by fifty men, who stepped gingerly as they descended. Hector Almeric was the first to speak.

"I don't understand this," he said, shifting from one foot to the other. "Our engineers definitely reported that the gravity on Ceres was one-thirtieth that on Earth. None of us is wearing gravity shoes yet my weight feels the same as on Earth."

"Your engineers were right," Michael Lance said, "but while I was still at Yale I invented what I call the Lance Neo-Gravity Pull. It will make any desired change in gravity."

"While you were still in college!" Almeric exclaimed. "Why didn't you patent it immediately? You could have been an Investor three years ago."

"I realize that," Lance said. "But even with all of my inventions I couldn't have earned more than three million dollars in the past three years. I expect to do better than that."

"I believe you did exhibit a certain tendency toward ambition yesterday," Almeric said dryly. He and the other men exchanged glances.

The fifty men grouped around Michael Lance were, with two exceptions, well into middle age or older. Their faces reflected the assurance of long domination. Years of good eating had added a stamp of rotundity to their figures, a stamp which they wore like an emblem of their class. The two younger men were already filling out to the proportions of affluence. Together they represented the money and the power of an entire Galaxy, of a million planetary systems.

"Gentlemen," Michael Lance said, "you will witness the results of a number of inventions today which will be entirely new to all of you—with the exception of Mr. Dwight Gregory. Although invented within the past six years none of them were patented until a few days ago. I carefully timed it so that the reports from the patent office would not reach your desks until late today."

"Dramatics," snorted one of the men.

"Of course," Michael Lance said with a smile. "Before we move on I might call attention to an addition to the nose of Mr. Gregory's ship. You may have overlooked it."

They looked toward the ship and saw for the first time a shining metal coil spiraling around the needled nose, spreading out until it reached a greater diameter than that of the ship.

"That is the Lance Energy Coil," the young man said. "Some of you may have noticed the quality of the clouds over Ceres as we came through."

"I did," one of the men said. He was Photiades, the head of the Uranium Monopoly. "Looked as if they were charged up. Is this an electrical storm area?"

Lance shook his head. "There is an energy belt around the entire planetoid. Nothing, gentlemen, can penetrate that belt without the proper key. The Lance Energy Coil is the only key."

"What about energy bombs?" another man asked.

"They will explode harmlessly in the outer atmosphere upon touching the belt," Lance said. "You may experiment as we're leaving if you like. Now look

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around you, gentlemen."

The fifty Investors looked. As far as they could see stretched rich verdurous grass, clipped as a lawn. To their left rose a shimmering house of the proportions of a palace. Its whiteness was almost translucent so that the walls seemed to be pulsing with light.

"That house!" exclaimed one of the men. It was Dubois, owner of the Construction Monopoly. "I've never seen building material like that. What is it?"

"Frozen energy," Michael Lance said. "Another process of mine. It means an endless supply of building material at almost no cost since it is merely drawn from space. It means quicker building. This house of fifty rooms was built in less than a week and it's possible to build several at the same time."

"What about durability?" Dubois asked.

"This house," Lance said, "is not quite finished. If left in its present state it would vanish in about two months. But as soon as I spray it with a hydrothermal solution it will last forever. Now—another feature of this house—which will appeal to your wives . . ."

MICHAEL LANCE removed a small metal case from his pocket and turned a dial on it. For a moment, nothing happened, then the walls of the house slowly became transparent, the furniture and fixtures fading into view. They had a glimpse of several moving figures.

"I don't think our wives would like that," one of the men said with a grin. "Suppose it happened just as they were bathing."

"That adjustment will not normally be built into the houses," Lance said, "but these adjustments will. Watch."

The interior of the house became invisible again as the walls took on a soft green tint. Then, one color following another, the house shifted through the spectrum.

"A mere touch of a button," Lance explained, "changes the length of the light waves, making the walls any color you desire. Since the furniture contains the same electromagnetic process it can therefore be changed to match the house."

"You control it with that?" Almeric asked, pointing to the metal case in Lance's hand.

"No, sir. That was merely a remote order to the servants in the house. Come, I'd like you to meet them."

The men walked through a garden, flowered in polychromatic designs, to the front door. It swung open, revealing a tall bronzed figure.

"Good morning, gentlemen," the figure said in a softly metallic voice. "Welcome to the Lance Estate."

"A robot!" exclaimed one of the men. "A robot servant!"

"Yes," Michael Lance said. As the men crowded around, examining the robot, he continued, "Of course, we have had robots capable of running certain machines for more than fifty years. But these robots, gentlemen, are capable of performing any physical action of men.

"They even duplicate themselves in a small factory on the other side of the planetoid. They are excellent cooks, wonderful gardeners, surpass any human valet or maid. They also obey spoken commands—without talking back."

"Young man," said Raymond Renault, the oldest one of the Investors, "I must admit that I'm glad that I don't have too many years to live. If you continue as you seem to have started the rest of the Investors will become impoverished paying royalties to you."

"Hardly," Michael Lance said with a smile. "Later you will all have the opportunity to see what the robots can do in the way of barbering and personal service. But now I'd like to show you other features of this house. This way, please."

The fifty men trooped behind him into a large room. Lance walked to the wall and pressed a concealed button. A large section of the wall vanished, revealing what appeared to be the interior of a large safe.

"Ceres," Michael Lance said, "is capable of being completely self sufficient. On the other side of the planetoid are

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garden and animal pens where everything needed can be raised and processed by the robots. There is also equipment to manufacture clothing and other personal needs. But here is a method of securing things from Earth, Venus or Mars."

"Another invention?" Almeric asked.

Lance nodded. "I've called this Space-Portation," he said. "It is possible with this to send any inanimate object through space with instantaneous transmission. With the aid of one of Mr. Gregory's employes on Earth I'd like to demonstrate it."

He pressed another concealed button and a red energy light flashed above the space in the wall. A moment later, a sheet of paper materialized within. As Lance lifted it out, the men could see a single line of type across the paper.

"What hath God wrought," one of them read aloud. "What sort of nonsense is that?"

"Just an idea of mine," Lance explained. "When the Ancients invented what they called the telegraph that was the first message sent. It amused me to have it be the first thing sent through Space-Portation. Now, we'll try something else."

HE pressed the button again and once more the red light burned. There was a shimmer of light in the wall space. The lines solidified and there was a ham.

"Good Planet, young man!" Almeric exclaimed. "Do you mean that you've withheld these inventions from the Board all this time?"

"That is my right," Lance said firmly. "Clause Two, Paragraph Three, of the Investors-Intellectuals Contract which replaced the old Constitution: 'Any invention completed during the University Period or the Five Years of Freedom may be used in any way to the advantage of the individual.' I still have two years left of my Five Years of Freedom."

"A space lawyer too," Almeric said with humor.

"Now," continued Lance, "the existence of the Space-Portation means more than the ability to obtain goods from other planets. It also means that a man could live here and transact all business, receive, sign and return papers anywhere in the galaxy without once leaving Ceres."

"That could be dangerous—for Investors," Renault snapped. "We'd be too much out of touch with events. The Liberals would love that."

"On the contrary you'd be more in touch. I'll show you." He led the way across to another wall. A press of a button and the entire wall became a huge screen.

"Another of your ideas?" Almeric asked dryly.

"Not exactly an invention," Michael Lance said. "I've made a few improvements on the present two-way Televisor. I'd like to show you one particular advantage. Mr. Gregory's cooperation made this demonstration possible."

The screen glowed with light and they found themselves watching a scene in the huge First Galactic Bank on Earth. Lance controlled it with a simple dial as they watched a close-up of figures being written in an account book, viewed the tellers counting money, then saw a janitor eating his meager lunch in the basement. There was a chuckle as one scene showed a young accountant bestow a pinch on a secretary as he passed.

"The planting of a few small electronic eyes," Lance said, "Will enable you to see everything within the range of each eye, thus providing a better method of checking than is now possessed. In fact the perfect spy system. This screen can also be divided so that conferences can be held, with as many as one hundred persons participating, each of them able to see all the others."

He pressed another button and the screen became a wall again. "The same screen will also operate between the houses to be built on this planetoid or can be used to scan any part of the surrounding grounds. Shall we go on, gentlemen?"

During the following hour the Investors were escorted through every room

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in the house and nowhere did the perfection lessen. The sleeping rooms could be darkened at any hour with the ceiling simulating the star-lit night sky. The library had an improved reading screen and the latest model of the Sleep Educator.

Celestial music flooded from the walls of the music room. The swimming pool contained energy drops, making it almost as good as the fountain of youth. They had just finished inspecting a dream-like playroom when one of the robots appeared.

"Luncheon is served, gentlemen," the soft voice announced.

The fifty Investors were accustomed to good food but they had seldom tasted anything like that luncheon, which was capably served by the staff of burnished robots. Hector Almeric was on the point of going to the kitchen to compliment the chef when he suddenly remembered that the chef was also a mechanical man. He subsided in his chair with a sheepish grin.

When they were finally relaxed over brandy and cigars Michael Lance spoke again.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you have now seen everything that can be offered on Ceres in the matter of gracious living. Thanks to Mr. Gregory we have gone over the house plans, furnishings and surroundings listed in the Dream Plan files which the Board has on all of you.

"We can guarantee to build, equip and landscape the estate which each of you has always wanted—all fifty to be ready for occupation within two months. The entire planet will, of course, be restricted to Investors and their families."

"What about transportation?" Almeric asked.

"We also own the planetoid Vesta," Lance said. "All spaceships will be quartered there so that Ceres will be free of rocket fumes. There will be a space-bus, driven by a robot, to take the smaller children to school on Earth. Then there will be an unlimited supply of space-limousines, cruisers or roadsters, with or without robot chauffeurs, for each member of your families. The pressing of a button will bring a ship to Ceres within five minutes."

"And you're suggesting that we all move here?" Renault asked.

"Our proposition is this," Lance said crisply. "The Galactic Realty Corporation will deliver the estate you've always dreamed about and will provide all service. The only humans on Ceres or permitted to land on it will be the Investors and their families.

"With all Investors on Ceres the Liberals will be unable to strike and there will be no revolution. With the time element eliminated, the personal risk eradicated, the Liberals can be tracked down and destroyed at leisure."

"How much would this cost us?" Hector Almeric asked.

"One million dollars from each of you, plus a servicing charge of one thousand dollars a month for operating Vesta."

"Fifty million dollars," Almeric said slowly. There was respect in his voice. "Of which you get two-thirds. I'm beginning to understand why a million dollars a year seemed so small that you withheld your inventions."

"It's cheap enough," Michael Lance said, "as a price for peace, security and —life."

THE President of the First Galactic Bank stood up, automatically smoothing his gray hair. "Gentlemen," he said to his fellow Investors, "I have kept quiet until now because I am a part owner in the Galactic Realty Corporation. The fact that I have financed this young man amply demonstrates my feelings about his proposition. But I want to urge you to consider this.

"My chief interest is not the profit, which after all is only reasonable. But last night, gentlemen, one of my own servants fired at me with a ray-gun—a servant who was cleared by the Psycho Service less than six months ago. This means that the Liberals are using some of the Manuals and have found a way of perfecting shields against the Psycho Probes. Gentlemen, Michael Lance is quite correct—he is offering us our lives."

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Dwight Gregory sat down and there was silence as the fifty men looked at each other. Then, slowly, all eyes centered on their Chairman, Hector Almeric.

"By Atom!" Almeric exclaimed. "I think you've done it, young man. We'll sign."

One by one the fifty men signed the contracts and wrote out a bank transfer for one million dollars. Then they returned to the Earth and the business of running the galaxy.

Michael Lance was better than his word for the construction on Ceres was finished within seven weeks. During the following two days fifty family Cruisers and as many more luggage ships landed on the small planetoid. The robots speedily unloaded the luggage and made the families comfortable. And it seemed not a minute too soon for there had been three more attempts to assassinate Investors.

That first day on Ceres Hector Almeric prowled around his new home. Down to the last beam of light, it was the exact house he had always dreamed of building. The gardens were as he had envisioned them, the rich Earth flowers, fern and bracken, mixed with the slashing red lilies of Mars and the pale blue Moon flowers. He wandered past the flowers and stood by the singing fountain he had first wanted when he was twenty.

Hector Almeric had every reason to be happy but he wasn't. He was worried and restless. He walked back into the conference room and tuned the Televisor to Dwight Gregory's wave-length. The big banker grinned like a schoolboy and scoffed at Almeric.

"The trouble with you, Hector," he said, "is that you've never learned how to relax. Why don't you call Earth and give somebody an order. That ought to make you feel better. And don't bother me again. I'm about to get a message from my robot—whom I've named Gertrude."

The screen faded as Gregory cut off. Almeric idly swung the tuner to Michael Lance's wave length and pressed the key. There was no answer. He twisted the dial to the number of his office on Earth and stepped up the power. The screen remained blank.

There was no reason for it, yet Hector Almeric felt his worry turning to fear. He crossed the room and pressed the button beside the Space-Portation. The energy light remained dull and lifeless. He paced back to the Televisor and once more tried to call Michael Lance. When there was no answer he set the scanner again with trembling hands. He gasped as the screen showed only flat green land. Michael Lance's house had vanished.

There was a warning note from the Televisor and he saw by the light on the Indicator that it was a call from Earth. Relief flooded him as he switched to the Earth channel. And then Michael Lance, the fifty-first Investor, was looking out of the screen. He was smiling.

"Michael," Almeric gasped, "what has happened to your house?"

"I must have forgotten to spray it with the final coat," Lance said with a shrug. "Careless of me, wasn't it? But it won't happen to the other houses."

"I don't understand," Almeric said. "And, Michael—there's something wrong with the Space-Portation. It doesn't work. And I couldn't get my office on the Televisor. Was the power off?"

LANCE grinned. "Have you tried calling a ship?"

"No."

"Well, don't bother. I'm afraid I lied to you about a couple of things, Almeric. There are no ships on Vesta. They were never built. I believe I also forgot to tell you that the robots were constructed so that they can never learn how to build ships."

"But there are plenty of ships," Almeric protested.

"They're all in use. No, I'm afraid there's no way for any of you to leave Ceres."

"We'll build one," Almeric shouted. "Jenkins was a space-engineer. He invented the Galactic overdrive."

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"I doubt if there are enough materials on Ceres," Michael Lance said pleasantly. "But it really doesn't make any difference. The energy band around Ceres cannot be penetrated from either side. The combination is set to change automatically every day. Even if you detect the key, by the time you can build a coil it will have changed."

Then it began to dawn on Hector Almeric. "But why?" he stammered. "*Why?* Do you think you can get away with being dictator of the Galaxy, with owning all the power and money? Is that what you're trying to do?"

"I don't know what I'll do, Almeric. The Council hasn't decided yet."

"The Council?" Almeric gasped.

Michael Lance nodded. "Oh, yes, the other lie I told you, Almeric, was in claiming that I was the inventor of all the improvements you are now enjoying. While the use of them was my idea they were really the result of cooperative work of the entire Council.

"You see, we are scientists who have finally become aware of our responsibility to all men—even Investors. No more will our work be used to exploit other people or to kill them. That's why you Investors are on Ceres now instead of having been killed."

"But there were attempts—"

"Only to frighten you, Almeric, so we'd be sure you would be more eager to move to Ceres. There were no assassinations after I was elected temporary leader of the Council of Liberals."

"*You!*" Almeric said hoarsely. "You're the scientist—"

Michael Lance nodded.

"But—but why?" Almeric said again.

"You know, Almeric. You've always known. You merely don't want to admit that you and the other Investors have lived at the expense of the billions of people in the galaxy." Even the loudspeaker picked up the irony in his voice. "I suppose it's only natural that you've closed your mind to the fact that there could be a day of reckoning. Remember what you said—you can't change human nature."

He paused, then went on. "But you should be happier, Almeric. Why don't you call a Board meeting and pass a law that everyone on Ceres has to be happy? After all, you have what I promised you—peace, security and life. And, thanks to the robots, luxury—including the estates you've always dreamed of owning. You and your descendants, Almeric, can live and rule each other on Ceres for eternity. No one can enter—or leave."

Hector Almeric was mute, his head bowed, before the screen.

"This will be your last communication with Earth," Michael Lance continued. "We are warping space so that the Televisor and Space-Portation channels to Ceres will be lost forever. On behalf of the free people of the Galaxy—which for the first time is all of them—I bid you goodbye, Hector Almeric."

Then just before his image faded from the screen, leaving it blank and gray, Michael Lance reached up and pulled at a lock of his hair.

The Revolution was over.

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

structive to prevailing theories, it was decried as false—the second when, as accepted *fact*, it was pronounced absolute truth—the third when, superseded by other theories, it was ridiculed as passé.

Why, he wanted to know, should it be any more sacred during its period of acceptance than during its other two periods? To this, of course, there can be no logical answer save that of human asininity.

Scientists Are Human

The trouble is that scientists, like the rest of us, are human—occasionally too much so for their pretensions to scientific detachment. A man who has been taught certain laws, who has accepted them and, perhaps, built his career upon them, is going to have a violent emotional reaction to anyone who comes along with a new set of laws which prove his own to be false.

The current war of biological theory between the Soviet and non-Soviet portions of the world provides a fine case in point. The so-called West has for many decades accepted the truth of the Mendelian laws—that heredity is not and cannot be affected by physical environment.

This, of course, conflicts utterly with the Marxian idea. So the Communists have come up with a theory that physical environment *does* affect heredity—and claim to have proved it via plant cultures. Each school decries the other as utterly false.

We have a layman's hunch that both schools may be at least partially right. If environment did not have some effect upon heredity, then why are almost all indigenous tropical humans darker of skin than those long native to the Arctic zone? We wouldn't know the answer—unless environment, over hundreds, mayhap thousands of generations, *does* have some effect upon heredity. However we seriously doubt that this effect is rapid enough to suit Soviet plans for a World Revolution.

The trouble is, of course, that the scientists who measure such things are human beings, therefore prey to all the emotional illogic from which human beings suffer. Even cybernetics may not be the ultimate answer to absolutely scientific measurements—for the machines must be made by men and it is men who must formulate the questions put to our most unprejudiced mechanical brains.

This being so we refuse to trust them as far as we could throw the Moon. And the recent discovery of this monumental error in regard to the planet Pluto would seem to bear us out—for it seems unlikely that any emotional problem was involved where such measurements were attempted.

Surprises in Space

Certainly surprises await us in space—when, as and if we ever get there. According to Charles Fort we will find the stars are merely holes in a surrounding barrier, letting light in from some outer cosmos. Again according to Fort we shall discover that the Earth and all upon it are property—belonging to some unguessed-at sort of owners "outside."

This seems unlikely if not impossible—for, of course, nothing is impossible until so proven. But the Pluto error makes us wince and wonder. The measurements of Dr. Kuiper and Mr. Humason were made via the Mt. Palomar telescope with the naked eye—since planets make inaccurately outsized images upon photographic plates. And we all know just about how reliable the human eye is scientifically.

As one of our colleagues suggests, the only way to make a truly accurate measurement of Pluto is to go out there with a tape measure and measure it. Well, if it is going to take twenty years to do it with the two-hundred-inch 'scope, we may be able to do just that. Let us hope so at any rate.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

IN line with our new policy, as inaugurated in the January issue of our companion magazine, STARTLING STORIES, we are pruning the letter section far more severely than in recent years. The main purpose is to shorten the department to the point where we can use a legible type-size, the secondary aim to cut down on drivel and sub-juvenality. All of which seems to make the following epistle singularly apropos.

COMING TO US
by Laura E. John

Dear Editor: This will doubtless be the most uncomplimentary letter you have read in a long time but I sincerely believe you have it coming to you. I know it is a policy to publish

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only letters that are typed, but did you ever stop to consider the percentage of fans that have no typewriters of their own and have no access to any? And it also seems to be a present-day policy to publish letters written by old stand-bys, old stand-bys in the sense of writing month after month. Very rarely do you see a letter by a new contributor.

Last but not least, is the number of letters that are nothing more than pure drivel, written by the immature clan who can neither talk nor write in any manner but slanguage and punctuation marks. It would appear that English is no longer taught in the schools.

Now please don't labor under the misapprehension that I am so old that I am mentally decrepit. It so happens that I still have a while to go before I reach the age "that life begins at." I have three children, one of school age. The other two are not yet three years old and I would bristle instantly at the first allusion to being called too old to understand the younger generation.

My husband and I have been reading science fiction and fantasy for some years. I think we have finally put our finger on just what is wrong with so many of the present-day stories that are being written. They are geared mostly to the level of the "la-de-da, hotcha-cha, hot-rod" boys and girls whose idea of entertainment is an insane saturnalia of action.

The authors should remember that a vast number of the people who read their work are mature men and women, who sincerely believe in the future of mankind and the ability of said mankind to someday attain the dream of all time—that of visiting other worlds—and the belief that there IS intelligent life elsewhere than here on Earth.

We do enjoy a certain amount of humor but it can be overdone to the detriment of an otherwise good story. Please pass the word along to the authors that they are not writing exclusively for morons and imbeciles, as periodically they do.

I have finished with the "brick-bats." Now for the orchids. We have just finished reading October *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. There wasn't one that insulted the intelligence too much. Orchids to John D. MacDonald for "Shadow on the Sand." Also to Eric Frank Russell for "First Person Singular." The others I won't comment on because, although they were not so good as the aforementioned two, they were entertaining.

Incidentally, we are still reading "Wine of the Dreamers" and our copy of the magazine in which it appears is so worn, that there is almost as much scotch tape as there is pulp. We are anxiously waiting for it to appear in book form. John MacDonald is an excellent writer, even though he does sometimes slip and turn out such drivel as "Spectator Sports" and the mediocre "Half-Past Eternity."

We buy a copy of each science fiction and fantasy magazine as it reaches the newsstands, and these uncomplimentary remarks in the beginning of the letter are not aimed solely at Thrilling Publications or any particular magazine put out by them. They include all publishers.

I presume that Editors and Authors have periodic "get-togethers" in which orchids and brick-bats are discussed and it is in this hope that this epistle is written. Perhaps it will go no further than your waste-basket, due to length, a new contributor and sharp criticism.

All I ask is that you read it. Printing it in the Reader Speaks is not necessary. I am striving to get Science Fiction out of the realm of those who class it all as drivel and put it up on the higher plane where it really belongs. With co-operation by all this can be done. —*Star City, Indiana.*

All right, we'll go down the line, Mrs. John. In the first place we do not print only letters that are typed—although heaven knows such letters make the task of setting up this column for the printer a lot quicker and easier. We have to type the others out, you see, ourselves. And we have always been more than willing to do this when we like an epistle.

Yes, we do tend to run a certain proportion of letters by what you term "old stand-bys." But we also run a goodly number in each issue by folk who inaugurate their missives with the phrase, "This is my first letter to . . ." In the October READER SPEAKS, which you cite, we published thirty-one letters, of which thirteen were by contributors hitherto unknown to us. Which is about average and seems to leave plenty of room for new faces.

Yes, we intend to take and are taking steps anent the "immature" Jabberwocky artists. For years now we have been attempting to gear our editorials to at least a reasonably articulate level.

Lifting the level of science fiction content is something we have been trying seriously to do during our editorial tenure. It is a slow process but we believe we are showing some progress.

Thanks for the compliments and the honest criticism. All we can say is that we shall do our darnedest to prevent a repetition of the brickbats—by removing any justification for same.

OCTOBER WORDS
by Captain Kenneth F. Slater

Dear Ed: A few words on last TWS, Oct. Without a doubt, MacDonald's tale was the outstanding item in the issue. FIRST PERSON SINGULAR came close behind and I'm glad to see Russell back in the lists.

THE TENTH DEGREE was not to my taste, but it was nicely handled, although the dragging in of the Tenth Degree, which gave it the title, seemed a little forced. I admit the hero had to get there, to get the damsels back to Earth, but if it had been played up more, and entered into the bulk of the yarn, it would not have seemed quite so "dragged in," to finish the tale.

Of the shorts, TRAFFIC was by far the best. Who is Branham a pen-name for? The

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other three drag along in the ruck. I rarely mention your editorials, but they are of greater interest than some of the tales. But on parallel time tracks, remember the discussion way back, in which the Coles and I entered?

I'll repeat one thing I said then and that in a universe (?) or system of an infinity of time tracks anything can happen and everything must. So one time track must be the one which no time traveler visits. Ours has just as much chance of being that one as any other—until we get visited. There is no "why should" about it—it just is or it isn't. No reason that we can conceive but if the possibility of the "broom" exists, then so must the possibility of the situation for which you can see no reason.

Ah, weel, bed calls ma awa'. Fantastically yourn (one day you'll print me concluding phrase).—*13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R., 23, c/o G.P.O., England.*

Our time-track may well have had time-traveling visitors, Ken, as previously pointed out. The chances of their turning up in the comparatively few centuries of recorded human history, however, seems almost nil when compared to the tens of millions of years of Earth's existence. Let's wait awhile before casting a final verdict either way.

Bolling Branham is no pen-name. He's a very pleasant, very attractive young man from the South who visited us a few months back. He sold us back before the war, in which he played an active role. We hope he will write some more stf for us soon.

AUTHOR IN THE NUDE
by Wallace West

Dear Editor: You have left me naked to the winter breezes by conspiring with Judson Vayles to deprive me of my precious safety pin!

Certainly the Germans, Britons, Gauls and Romans made hand-forged pins and even attached them to brooches. Nevertheless, they tied their clothing on with cords or leather thongs.

If they had safety pins an American named Hunt certainly put something over on the United States Patent Office in 1849. (The handiest reference on this is in the World Almanac.)

My grandma (of whom more anon if ye ed. be kind) often told me of the sensation created when safety pins were introduced just prior to the Civil War as a means of fastening baby's unmentionables.

Excuse the wail. I'm rather proud of the accuracy of the historical research which went into "The Weariest River."—*Ralston, New Jersey.*

We hereby appoint Author Wallace West our official TWS pinup boy.

VOICE OF DOOM
by Rodney Palmer

Dear Editor: I have lately been burdened with flashes of brilliant perspicacity relating particularly to the future—or possible future of the beloved fiction. In my last missive I mentioned sf was not only dying—it was dead. The statement, flat and bold as it was, perhaps needs a dash of qualification. Yes, let's finish that up swiftly by qualifying—THE PRESENT DAY PRESENTATION OF SF IS DOOMED.

I use as my source the experience of the past of pulp-publishing. First pulps were general—adventure or love at any rate. The adventure type mag jelled fantasy, SF, sport, exotic, mystery, etc. The pulps spread into specialization quickly, with definite categorical material. One pulp became entirely western, another entirely mystery, etc.

There were general magazines still, but the specialized mags established markets for themselves *inevitably*. There were specializations within specializations—taking mystery, for example, some mags narrowed to easily batted-out formula adventure. Other mags developed a *maturer* policy. Specialization is a continuing process—seemingly a natural process, too.

I maintain meekly it's time science-fiction followed through in this natural process. Vague beginnings are of course discernible. They are *very* vague. The reason for this vagueness *now* lies right on the surface—it is a definite clear lack of the knowledge of just what science-fiction really *is* and what psychological need it supplies.

I cheerfully confess I am familiar with psychology like I understand the theory of relativity—but horse-sens' is horse-sense and the truth is I'm so darned ordinary I've come to consider myself the exemplified and personified cross-section of trends and demands of an American public sobbing to be entertained.

Yet psychology, whether it be clever double-talk or a *trend in itself*, forces the individual at least to stop to ponder. And when one considers such items as psycho-somaticism, latent sadism and maschocism and a race of "humans" bolting head over heels toward self-destruction—well, what's *your* favorite worry?

Actually it's my opinion that all anybody wants is a house by the river in the country. I *don't* believe we humans can conceive infinities of either time or space or that we can travel and adventure in same. I *do* believe science fiction is a great cover-up for some inner need that we want expressed. And in science-fiction as in practically everything else these days—everything is the opposite from what it seems.

I recommend:

1. Mobilize some psychologists quickly and get them to tell you what they believe science fiction is covering up for: Whatever that element is, serve it up in sf's peculiarly sublimated or adulterated form.

2. SF is diversified and many hidden libido tweakers may be uncovered. The next step would be to specialize accordingly.

3. *Please* establish a definite male or female slant. If the male slant doesn't pay—eliminate it altogether and hit for the women. That's unfortunate suggesting for the males, but it lends toward solubility in business.—*226 West 60th Street, Chicago 21, Illinois.*

You seem to have things backward as far as we are concerned, Rodney. We have been

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working against specialization steadily in our magazines ever since we had anything to say about them. Certainly they were pretty specialized when first we knew them. Now, we hope not.

The greatest need in science fiction stories today, to our way of thinking, is the same basic need of all good stories—credible tri-dimensional characterization with which a tri-dimensional reader-audience can identify itself. Be it male, female or alien, dealing with a galactic future, a Mediterranean past or a Terrestrial present, it is characterization that must carry the story.

Science fiction does not require psychiatry or even dianetic audition. It answers two basic human urges—one, a desire to escape from the here and now—two, a desire to unleash the speculative imagination that lurks within all of us."

Furthermore, we do not believe it is doomed—it is rather enjoying a lusty infancy. Specialization might well choke it off far short of maturity.

VARIATIONS
by Bill Morse

Sir: There are two variations of stf which I really enjoy—

a.) The mysterious breakdown in time and/or space

b.) Telepaths.

So you can judge for yourself the pleasure I had from John D. MacDonald's lead novel. He ties up all his loose ends very neatly, though I doubt if the Sovereign State of Texas would approve his treatment of its police lieutenants.

Is Bolling Branham new, a nom-de-plume or a graduate from one of the lesser breeds of stf? TRAFFIC seems too good for a first story really. Can we have some more by the gentleman, please?

The point of THE CHALLENGE is well made. No one really wants to know the future. Palmists and teacup readers get rich on skeptics who want to scoff when predictions fail and on pinheads whose chief thrill comes from a wild guess which hits the mark.

I did not realize until Chapter Five that FIRST PERSON SINGULAR was E. F. Russell's version of Genesis. Maybe I am a lame-brain. This is as neat a refutation of Darwinism as I have ever read. Flying saucers too!

THE TENTH DEGREE—no, thank you.

BONE OF CONTENTION—space madness. Very neat.

THE SALAD CITIZENS—I rate this second only to SHADOW ON THE SAND. Humor has a definite place in stf as long as the dosage is carefully measured and Walt Sheldon here is every bit as funny as Kuttner with his VOICE OF THE LOBSTER.

Once again—an average issue. Before you explode let me add that I mean average for TWS, not for stf as a whole. The offerings of your competitors seldom coax me to expend a hard-earned quarter, whereas TWS and SS are bought sight unseen. And that, I think, is a very neat wiggle out of a tight corner. All true at that. I hope it soothes your bruised sensitivities. What happened to Finlay—and Napoli? With all due respect to Orban and Astarita, they lack the final polish.

These people who object to Bradbury have the same irritating quality as a mosquito. So we who appreciate the man are adolescents? I wish to heck I were! Bradbury, as far as I can see, is the only writer in stf who does not write about idealized dream people. His characters react to circumstances in the same way that real people do.

Since some readers of stf want only to read escapist literature, which tells them how perfect the human race is and will be, they find Bradbury a shock. There is no perfect hero for identification as the reader—again bad. They should read Horatio Alger instead.

This realistic treatment of characters is a good thing. Kuttner, van Vogt, MacDonald and company, excellent writers though they are, have a habit of labeling their people as good or bad and making them stay completely so throughout the story. At the risk of provoking Marion Zimmer Bradley, I would cite Kuttner's THE DARK WORLD as a fine example of that treatment.

Only in the final paragraph did the hero behave as a human, and even then only in thought. For the rest of the time there were the forces for good, whose behavior never slipped—and the forces for evil, whose malevolence never faltered. A pretty thought—a popular thought—but far from real.

Don't get me wrong—I enjoy all stf from THE SHIP OF ISHTAR to Oona and Jick. But the stories I remember best and appreciate most are those which assume that I am sufficiently adult to realize that humanity is as yet imperfect in evil as well as in virtue, that no mortal man will behave uniformly under all possible circumstances.

I don't think anyone who has read KALEIDOSCOPE or PAYMENT IN FULL will ever forget them. Nor could he deny the horrible reality in the action and claim that he would not, himself, act likewise.—*W.E.E. (RAF Signals), R.C.A.F., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.*

Quite a letter, Bill. You seem to have emphasized and developed pretty fully what we sought to stress about character in our answer to Rodney Palmer's epistle above. You'll see more Finlay and Napoli in forthcoming issues. Also more of Stevens-Lawrence, who has just recovered from a long siege of illness.

By the way, we heard Bradbury's AND THE MOON BE STILL AS BRIGHT done on a recent DIMENSION-X radio program. Even with a hideous flock of sound effects both conflict and character came through magnificently.

HOW?
by Mrs. Dorothy Collins

Dear Editor: As a new (very, October issue)

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fan, what I'd like to know is how I can obtain reprints. My girl friend tells me that the latest issue is harder to find than hen's teeth. Do you have subscriptions? If not, you should. For the time being, though, please notify your readers the date the next issue comes out so that we can get it without too much trouble.

Consider yourself the proud possessor of a new fan who considers most stf mags too, too —everything! By the way, all the stories were scrumptious. But especially wonderful were FIRST PERSON SINGULAR and THE TENTH DEGREE. It's hard to choose the most interesting.—*2956 West Jefferson Avenue, Trenton, Michigan.*

For a subscription for twelve issues (two years) of TWS send $3.00 in cash or money order to Circulation Department, the Thrilling Group, Suite No. 1400, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. Our companion magazine, STARTLING STORIES, handles subscriptions the same way. Our magazines appear the first week of every other month, dated two months in advance. Thus this issue (February, 1951) is on the stands early in December, 1950. Yes, we consider ourselves a proud possessor, at any rate in your instance, Mrs. Collins.

BIG EYE
by Fred Stuckey

Dear Sir: On the back page of the October, 1950, issue of TWS I see you have an advertisement for a Popular Library reprint of THE BIG EYE by Max Ehrlich. This is the first science fiction novel published by Popular Library. Now that the ice has been broken do we get more? If so, let's not have any of that stuff published back in the twenties and thirties. Keep it modern.

Novels from the last ten years would be best —especially if they are taken from TWS and SS. It would be even better if you only reprinted books that have been printed the last few years, as you did THE BIG EYE, and left the magazine novels alone entirely. There are a few of those novels that would be nice in pocket size, though.

The ones I'm thinking of were published during the last five years, mostly in SS. I won't bother listing them. You probably already have a few of your own selections ready for future publication, if there are any future P.L. publications.

Comments on the contents of the Oct. ish:

SHADOW ON THE SAND by MacDonald. Excellent! As in all Mac's work the characterization was good. He has a clever way of jumping around to different characters without losing track of the hero. I don't mean that he's the only author that employs this device, just that he does it better than most.

Orban's illos were good. But Stevens would have been better.

TRAFFIC by Bolling Branham. The idea was good but the way it was handled sagged in spots. This guy should stick to one person instead of jumping around to different characters. He doesn't work it as well as MacDonald. At least not in this story. The general situation was kind of new. In fact it was new, with the exception of a story by Ed Hamilton written about twenty years ago, entitled THE STAR-STEALERS.

CHALLENGE by Williams. Again the idea was good and well told. Williams usually comes up with a good one.

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR by Russell. Oh, brother! Adam and Eve yet and again. Well-written, though. I kinda liked it. This is the first one of these stories I ever particularly enjoyed.

THE TENTH DEGREE by Sam Merwin, Jr. Phooey! Two sneers and a dirty look. 'Nuff said.

THE BONE OF CONTENTION by Temple. Same comment as above.

THE SALAD CITIZENS by Sheldon. I didn't think much of the general idea but I liked his style. Humorous. That ending was neat but I guessed it when he took the first bite. The hero, that is.

THE FRYING PAN. I got a laugh out of this.

Thanks for printing my letter. Concerning that (utterly) confidential information: okay. Let's have Lawrence back. What's his real name? Lawrence or Stevens?—*118 North Richard Street, Bedford, Pennsylvania.*

His real name, for the umpteenth time, is Vern Stevens. Future publication of stf novels by POPULAR LIBRARY will depend largely upon how THE BIG EYE succeeds. Yes, there are some honeys in mind.

TRAFFIC JAM
by Shelby Vick

Dear Editor: In the Oct ish, the only thing really worthy of favorable comment, as far as I could see (excepting, that is, the novel) was Bolling Branham's short story, TRAFFIC—providing, of course, that Bolling Branham isn't a penname for an established author—fresh blood in the field (wish some of it was mine!) and all that. The story wasn't superb but I liked it.

CHALLENGE was okay, ditto BONE OF CONTENTION and THE SALAD CITIZENS, by Walt Sheldon, another up-and-coming young'n, was good—back to it in a moment.

SHADOW ON THE SAND—MacDonald. It's an old trite (but so true!) compliment but there's nothing my vocabulary will allow me to do but say, "It's by MacDonald—what more need I say?"

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR will pass, I suppose, but I'm very tired of this "In the beginning . . ." type story, where they try to show the "real story" behind Genesis. I'll admit that the actual happening could very easily have been muchly distorted as it passed down or that the entire story could be merely allegorical—but I DON'T like these story-explanations. They seem to twist and distort things worse than mere passage of time ever could.

Which covers all the stories but— Well! Shades of Shangri La! Mystic! Sahib! This is TOO much! THE TENTH DEGREE is a slap

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in the puss to every s-f fan that reads TWS! Any day now, I'm expecting flying carpets and pixies, broomsticks and witches! But even that would be better than occultism.

Have you ever noticed how, every now and then, a theme will be repeated in one issue? There are lots of for instances but I'll take a current one for now—FIRST PERSON SINGULAR and THE SALAD CITIZENS. In both cases the food—or consuming of same—brought about a change. Though I must say the change was a bit more—uh—shall I say "noticeable?"—in the latter.

SF movies—In your review of *Destination Moon*, you mention that it was a movie that didn't need stars. Uh-huh. Which is along the line of what I meant—for a while, SF movies should be along the *Destination Moon* line. Heavy on the science—very accurate.

I know of some non-fen that found mistakes in *Rocketship X-M*. Things like that are likely to be sneered at. 'Tain't funny, sonny—and 'tain't good. So let's have more accuracy, and GOOD SF pix—films that lean towards science, thus minimize characterization.

In such a role, a star would be wasted—not to mention the more important fact that the star might dim the REAL stars and the planets and the moons and make SF no more than a "unique background" or "startlingly efficient vehicle" for the Names of H'wood.

Asks you, what have we got against story stuff about elderly people. Replies I, to those who haven't experienced old age it's an even more alien kind of life than the daily occupation of a citizen of Rigel IV. Age is one thing the imagination has trouble simulating. What experience can it possibly parallel with the sensation of growing old? And no matter how outré our tastes, most of us want to read something we can understand.—*Box 493, Lynn Haven, Fla.*

Well, we presume you'll just have to *grow* to like stf tales about folk who have managed to pile up a respectable number of years of living. We hope you are still reading it when that time comes. And that we are still putting out stf magazines. What are we saying?

ALAS, POOR ARCHIE!
by Lin Carter

well lemuel i warned you this letter was coming a la, archy as you no doubt recall archy was a cockroach into whose corporeal body transmigrated the soul of an vers libre poet well it seems the soul of archy has transmigrated into the body of lin carter so quit yelling plagarism you slobs i only

hope the soul of don marquis didn't transmigrate into the body of one lemuel mutton if it did then i can see that blue pencil coming but what the h dash double l as i always say toujours gai as mehitabel would remark to get on to the latest t w s i thot that letter by joe gibson the most interesting and entertaining since g dash d knows when and b lauritz hanson had one heck of an entertaining letter here s my vote for more letters from these boys what did you crums think of that letter by shelby vick i have some good ideas on this here subject of casts for s t f movies how about margaret o brien as blackie due quesne of the skylark sagas and roddy mc dowell as lazarus long from heinlein s novel methuselah s children you don t like them heh well wotthehell wotthehell i refuse to get in

on all this controversy over swords daggers stillettos rapiers in science fiction as i am an ole sword and dagger man myself

three cheers for vernell

coriell i always liked burroughs myself still he did

write some stinkeroos synthetic men of mars and the

eternal lover come to my think tank as examples a

great author nonetheless

the review of destination moon redoubled my desire to

see it when are you reviewing rocketship x m we

have the last movie booked for a midnight show at the theatre in which i condescend to work i had better get to the stories as probably all this personal stuff is being cut well

always a great believer in the pythagoream theory of the

transmigration of the soul as i am i read merwin s little

novelet with interest it

was pretty good i am looking forward to a novel

by this writer some day what

say lemuel well

john d mac donald who is i understand a fellow floridian turned out a quite absorbing

novel here in parts it reminded me of isaac asimov an author i like and one you should try to get something by citadel of lost

ages sounds swell for next issue i always like leigh

brackett and by the way lemuel do you remember me remarking several

letters ago that i wondered if the title for her fine

novelet lake of the gone forever was taken from black

marigolds a sanskrit love poem i happen to be familiar

with well

i got a card from her a little while back and you might be

interested in it she said in part quote you are of course quite right about the title

it s from black marigolds which is to my mind one of the

greatest love poems ever written in sanskrit or any other language unquote i agree with her if anybody is interested in this poem a good part of it

is quoted in john steinbeck s novel cannery row steinbeck

is a good boy the novelet traffic or mebbe it is a short story but what ever the h

dash double l it is was very good and quite if i might say better than the average run of fiction you print i

think mr branham has a rather intriguing style well

first person singular was pretty good to i

like science fiction stories based on biblical legends nelson

s bond does things like this quite

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often why don't you get some yarns by him well lemuel
i have taken up enough of your time i hope this letter in the style of the immortal archy
wasn t too boring i may write some more like this as i consider archy to be the highest flowering of intellectualism in the u s a cheerio my dearie as mehitabel the cat would say
—*1734 newark st so st petersburg fla*

okay lin though
ye edde may not be the
transmigrated soul of
the late don
marquis we
did know him well and of
his books have quite
a few and
never
in all archie did
we see him
usesuchlonglines

WE'LL TAKE AN UNFRA-RED PISTOL
by Bob Hoskins

Dear Editor: On the whole, the October 1950 issue of TWS is slightly below the high standard set by the October 1949 ish. Most memorable tales from that ish are de Camp's *The Hibited Man;* West's *Lure of Polaris;* Brackett's *Lake of the Gone Forever;*, Wellman's *Backward, O Time!* and St. Clair's *The Gardener.*

On this trip you give us, as memorable tales, MacDonald's *Shadow on the Sand,* and Sheldon's *The Salad Citizens.* The rest, sorry to say, are at the best only average, with most of them being mediocre. I had high hopes for *The Tenth Degree* but it disappointed me.

One fan-reviewer would disagree about Wollheim's anthology. I haven't yet seen it but from what I hear, it contains—literally—twelve moldy pieces of crud, with two by DAW himself. Oh Elsberry, where be ye? An argument on this should be right up your alley.

Somebody in TRS asked a guy whether he would prefer to face a madman with a six-inch hunting knife, in a dark room, or a madman with a loaded pistol. (I think that's what he used for a firearm.) I ask *him* whether he'd like to face a madman with a fully loaded submachine-gun, or a madman with a knife, in this self-same dark room! Throws a different light on matters, eh?

I am afraid that this is all for the nonce. But I'll be haunting your doorstep again next month when the November SS rolls along. I really feel sorry for you.—*Lyons Falls, New York.*

Oh, come now—FIRST PERSON SINGULAR and TRAFFIC, in our October, 1950, issue were both deserving yarns. A fact which you will probably discover come October, 1951. Distance has a way of lending dat ole debbil enchantment. As for your darkroom theory—why not stay out of same like a reasonable adult and avoid all such contretemps.

EXCEPTIONAL
by Thomas E. Voorhees

Dear Editor: I must say in opening that it was an exceptional issue. That fact, though is not the only reason to write to TWS; the other is the, as you say, the fear prompted criticism of the Writing of Ray Bradbury.

There are many things that produce fear in the minds of men but the basic fear is death, a minor French poet, modern, expressed this as:

Born in the womb
With the unborn child,
Hiding in the shadows of life,
Always attacking,
Sometimes repulsed,
Always victorious.

Bradbury wraps this mood in a fabric of many textures, of many designs of such power, that he can truly be called an artist blending mood as a painter mixes and blends the colours at his disposal. But one cannot devise an analogy between Bradbury and Titian because Bradbury is an individual with his own powers of expression and his own feelings. Bradbury has shown the influence of Poe, Wolfe and the Hemingway school in his writings but this has helped him in his understanding of man, or rather MAN. In the novel, *The Martian Chronicles* Bradbury revealed Bradbury the individual.

Item number two: Eric Frank Russell has written a remarkable novelet, an example of craftsmanship. *First Person Singular* is a good choice for an anthology. The rest of the stories were not bad either. An exceptional issue, I am very glad to say, for your recent issues have been mediocre in fiction, but your editorials have been rather thought-provoking. Aha, another thinking editor. I think the slicks have parrots for editorial writers, they all say the same thing.—*807 East Pastime, Tucson, Arizona.*

Well, let us hope Ray B. finds time soon for some TWS and SS stories if only to keep you happy. However, you can read him copiously and in full flower of competence in plenty of higher-paying publications, praise Allah. Thanks for the amiable view of the October issue. Hoskins and others had us a bit down.

SCALPED?
by Dean McLaughlin

Dear Editor: I suspect that by now Bob Heinlein is after your scalp anent your grouping him among the swordplay boys. You cited in "The Reader Speaks" the case of *Beyond This Horizon,* which you claimed to be crawling with buckles, swash and sabres. Not so. Having examined said novel I am unable to find so much as a jacknife. There is considerable dueling in BTH but it is done with sidearms, not swords.

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Hamilton Felix, the hero (or reasonable facsimile) affects an automatic pistol modeled after those of our own day, while other characters use various types of (pardon the expression) ray-guns, which, as nearly as I can gather, seem to employ supersonic vibration.

What you probably mistook for bloody knives was a reference to the technique of fighting used by the less-skilled young braves, namely, activating the ray-gun before taking aim, bringing the beam down from the ceiling with a "chopping motion." That chopping is the closest thing to mutual butchery in the novel.

One correspondent in the October issue claims that men of the future will naturally turn to swordplay for fighting, since it is so artistic. I hate to disillusion said gentleman, but military men are not particularly interested in art on the battlefield, and while the bayonet may be a shoddy substitute for fencing, it is used only as a secondary weapon. Generals see little art in any form of killing, and choose therefore the most efficient, not the most artistic means. To me it is no more artistic to carve a man than to blow him into little bits.

In your review of *Destination Moon* you name the site of the rocket's landing as the crater Tycho. Better see the film again. Not only will it help the box office, but you will learn that the crater is not Tycho but Harpalus.

In your editorial, you state that "to travel faster than time, one would have to travel faster than the speed of light." Wrong again! Actually, when you walk across the room you are traveling, in time at a rate slightly (unnoticeably slight) greater than what I will term, for discussion, the universal constant.

The rule is, as velocity approaches the speed of light, time approaches zero. This means that if a body is traveling at somewhat less than the speed of light time for that body will be less than universal time. For your further enlightenment I recommend L. Ron Hubbard's recent novel *To The Stars*, which appeared in a competitor earlier this year.

And the moral of this story is: get your facts straight before going off the deep end. —*1214 West Washington Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

We'll hang two of our heads in shame over the Heinlein-swordplay and DESTINATION MOON wallops (to date the author of both has not wielded his scalpel on us) but refuse to assent to your time-carping. Traveling faster than time, in our lexicon, implies going into the past, not the future. To accomplish this the speed of light must be exceeded.

INFINITE MESS
by James Lewis

Dear Ed: In the Oct. TWS you spoke of an imaginary spaceship gaining infinite mass at light velocity and bursting out of the universe. This galactic growth, as you put it, seems to be the accepted idea of what happens at light speed.

However, in a simplification (HA) of the theory of relativity I once partially read, infinite mass was said to be an infinite resistance to motion. This infinite inertia, it further stated, was nothing more than concentrated energy. If this were true (being but 14 I wouldn't know) the space traveler's fuel problem is solved, at light speeds anyway.

He uses an inertia eliminator (invented 2023, you know) to unconcentrate the mass and shoot it out the ship's tail end. Infinite power. The reason for all this is that I want to know is mass in the relativity theory another term for inertia, as the book said, or size, as the stf authors claim.

Now, about the stories: "Shadow on the Sand" was superb, one of the best I have ever read. Both novelets were good. Russell's was the better of the two. The shorts were all good, but I liked "Contention (A Bone of)" and "Salad Citizens" best. Shame on Sheldon though. Doesn't he know there isn't any planet under all those clouds?—*29-10 Butler St., E. Elmhurst, N. Y.*

We'll put the mass-energy query squarely in the hands of any readers who feel qualified to answer Mr. Lewis. Personally, in our present post-prandial mood, we favor the expansion idea.

TRADESMAN
by Gerry de la Ree

Dear Editor: Just procured October issue of TWS from the local newsstand and promptly read John MacDonald's "Shadow on the Sand." The yarn proved as good, if not better, than his "Wine of the Dreamers." I haven't read a really bad story by the guy yet.

MacDonald seems to possess a smooth writing style, although at first you get the impression you're playing hop-scotch, thanks to his habit of jumping from one place to another. His characterization is creditable and his scientific background is just about right—not too much to ruin the yarn nor too little to turn it into pure fantasy.

Try and hold onto the guy. He has all the earmarks of becoming tops in the field—if he doesn't write himself dry.

I didn't get to the shorts yet, but the letter section is on a par with past issues.

I've got a number of back issues of TWS and SS that I'm willing to trade or sell, if any of the readers are interested in filling in gaps in their collections.—*277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, New Jersey.*

MacDonald is purportedly doing us a lead for SS at present. It seems unlikely, however, that he will write himself out in stf. John D. is not only a prolific author but one who likes to operate in a wide variety of fields. So, should he feel the onslaught of staleness in any one of them, he simply slides over into another.

LONESOME OR LOATHSOME?
by Myrtice Taylor

Dear Mr. Editor: I shall not begin this letter with the usual stuff and nonsense. You know

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that you have a good magazine or at least you should. You couldn't keep printing it if you didn't.

Some of your stories I like, some I don't. I certainly don't blame the writer if I don't. I have hopes of being a writer myself so I can understand how he feels about his efforts. Besides I just don't have the colossal conceit of some people who seem to think that everything should be written with their own tastes in mind. Of course I'd rather read what I like but then I'm not so hard to please anyway.

Now please tell me if you only get letters from just a few or are they just the "privileged few?" I mean the same old names we see in every issue. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind. I just wondered if you could make room for one more?

I have a special reason for asking. My nickname here at home is "Poetess." It is applied with great sarcasm and mockery. This makes me very unhappy. Especially since I can't seem to get anything in print but "Religious" poems. You seem to enjoy a rhyme whether it is good or not, so I'm sending you my rhyme. Please print it for me. At least I can see how it looks.

As a last request won't someone please write to me. I'm lonesome! It doesn't matter who, where or how many.—*P. O. Box No. 81, Arapahoe, N. C.*

Very well, Myrtice, your "rhyme"—

I STAND TALL IN THE DESERT

Ghosts of silvery raindrops
Sing a sweet refrain;
On the winged breeze of memory
Beats the silver rain.

Whispering, swaying treetops
That live on in my mind
Bring back the magic of long ago,
And the things I left behind.

Alien skies above me,
Alone in the sands so red,
Those who were once my comrades,
Now silent, cold, and dead.

The ship is a silvery bullet
On the red sands' shifting flow.
A spent and twisted bullet
In the twin moons' faded glow.

I stand tall in the desert
Because I dare not bend.
Alone in the alien darkness,
Alone and without a friend.

Rain and the swaying treetops
Are only a memory;
Yet on through my lonely vigil
They go on haunting me.

Death and deadly danger
Are oft the Spaceman's plight.
Yet I stand tall in the desert
Alone in the alien night.

All very nice, say we, Myrtice—there's just one thing disturbs us. Our pomes we spot though good or not, you say, and this perturbs us. So go stand tall in the desert, with magic far behind, at least we've run your dogg'rel—which should give you peace of mind.

OCTOBER HONORS
by Francis M. Mulford

Dear Sir: Honors for the October issue of TWS went to "First Person Singular" by Eric Frank Russell and "The Tenth Degree" by Sam Merwin, Jr. Especially enjoyable to the optics were the illustrations by Astarita and Orban. Who drew the one on page 133?

The short lead novel, "Shadow on the Sand" by John D. MacDonald, gave the two former stories quite a tussle for first place medals. I prefer short stories anyway. They take less of my time. I don't mean that the stories are a nuisance to read but that I have little time to read any stories.

That brings to mind a little incident that occurred one night not so long ago. I had retired and was dozing until I suddenly awoke, listening. A prowler was near at hand. Fingers worked at the latch of the shutters nearest the entrance. The shutters opened. Moonlight fanned into the room from the courtyard.

The shutters closed gently. The latch clicked into place.

Footsteps, light as silk, brushed along the floor, stopped momentarily at my desk and just as lightly stole away. They ceased to be audible at the head of the stairs.

The silvery bells of a nearby church chimed the four quarters, and a harsher bell clanged three times.

In the morning I dressed hurriedly and found the latest issue of THRILLING WONDER STORIES had mysteriously vanished. A member of my family had taken it for midnight reading and didn't wish to waken me. I was relieved.

Enough for stories of my own. Let's see more in TWS.—*512 Linwood Avenue, Buffalo 9, New York.*

Thanks for the anecdote, Francis.

OH, THEM TEXAS GALS!
by Earl Newlin, Jr.

Dear Editor: I fear that John D. MacDonald is slipping. I fear that John D. has done slup. This, bear in mind, comes from a MacDonald fan. In "Shadow on the Sand," unimaginative unemotional Amro underwent a complete change of character. And why? All because he falls for a little Texas gal. In Amro's loutish condition he couldn't have felt any affection and even if he had it was unlikely that he would refute years of training.

A little word (or two) about telepathy. Although most stf "prophecies" are based on current trends or discoveries, we have progressed little along the line of telepathy. If we ever perfect this non-technical art there will be no mental fencing, as J.D.'s alien planet characters did. The mind may someday be able to receive strongly projected thoughts but never to probe. There is, of course, the vague possibility that I could be wrong.

I read your editorial on time travel and saw that you missed a small point. Consider time as a fourth dimension, if you will, but above all, consider it as relative (almost anything is relative, y'know. To you, "Hold That Tiger" may be jazz but it's a love song to a tiger). I have often traveled to the future, causing no paradoxes, involving no multiple time tracks.

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You don't believe I have? Let me prove it. When you are waiting for something pleasant to happen the chronos drags. When you're having the time of your life an hour goes by in a few minutes. It all depends upon that "time-sense" which is prevalent in all of us. We have little gadgets called clocks, emotionless little things, composed of springs and wheels. They keep us in check.

However, suppose you come home, Ed, dead tired from your grueling job of sitting in your editorial office with your feet propped upon the desk. You fall into bed, noting the clock says 11:30 (it really says "tick-tock" but why split hairs?). An instant later you hear an impertinent ringing from the clock which now says 7:30.

Sun streams through your windows which a few seconds before were merely black patches on your wall. You have come to take this form of time-travel for granted. But that's what it is, in effect. You have lived a few seconds, while most of the rest of the world lives eight hours.

It would be logically possible, then, to travel into the future through suspended animation. But once you get there you couldn't come back unless you could travel into the past. As to traveling into the past—look, I told you how to travel into the future—now it's your turn.

It is a bit childish to keep your identity a secret, dear editor, when so many people know who you are. Anyone interested in knowing name of editor TWS & SS, write me. (And stop muttering about Lemuel Mutton in your beard. Ed.) Also, if any of you guys or gals would like to correspond with me, just type me a little letter. Or a big letter for that matter.

I was just gloating over my two year collection of TWS & SS the other night. I like to fondle the bright covers and ragged edges, as a miser his gold. This gives me many happy memories. Your lead novels offer the best chance to escape from the four walls of today.

Some people feel insulted if you insinuate that stf is escapist stuff but that's all any kind of fiction is. And if I'm going to escape I'm going to do it good.

I wish you could bring your letter column up to date. They aren't printed until four or sometimes five months after they are written. Often these letters are on current events but how current can a four-month-old letter be?

Those letters just weren't
Too very amazin'
Because they weren't *currant*,
My protests they're *raisin*.

Getting personal, again, I was almost afraid to write to you. Most editors pass off the letters with a fatherly pat on the head. But oh, how often I recollect your tearing a protesting fan to little pieces! There have been many members of fandom which you dismembered.

I remember the sad case of Alfred Knight. I didn't agree with the kid either but did you have to crucify him? That wasn't the first time. You have often put spice into your retaliations.

I was going to write you a letter objecting to your use of the word "pseudo" linked to "science" in our beloved stf but I saw that another fan made that fatal mistake. Oh well if such hard-fisted skepticism in an editor is responsible for such top-notch mags as TWS & SS, then keep it up (of course, the guys who write the stories are partly responsible for the quality of the magazine too).

Say, I started to write you a short little note about time travel and look wha' hoppen. Never knew I was so multiloquent. I'll just wind up with this—though some people think Raymond D. Bradbury is merely a necrologist I shall defend him to the death. To the death of each of his story-heroes, that is. I'm such an ardent Bradfan, I celebrate each August 22nd.—*103 Peck Avenue, San Antonio 10, Texas.*

Which date will doubtless go ringing down the corridors of time as some sort of Bastille. Day or something—right, Earl, boy? Just what in hades did we do to dismember Alfred Knight? It wasn't in the October issue. Sorry but the letter-lag is unavoidable due to printing schedules. As for your time-travel, well—

In naming sleep for traveling time
Your theory we no lichee
But just in cashew give it tung
Again we'll not it spikee.

But this is the wrong end of the meal for the appetizers. *Adieu* until next month and THE ETHER VIBRATES in SS. Please keep them coming—and keep them amusing, controversial or just plain good.

—THE EDITOR.

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A Fanzine Commentary

IN Volume One, Number Three, of QUANDRY (?) subtitled "A Peculiar Publication" and published "something like monthly" by Lee Hoffman at the "Sign of the Ink-Black Woodwork"—more simply 101 Wagner Street, Savannah, Georgia, we find the following verse, "swiped from Dave Hammond," at the bottom of page eighteen—

A squirrel looked at a fan-ed,
Then his mother's eyes did meet.
"Yes, darling," said the mama squirrel
"But he's not the kind we eat."

A moderately amusing little ditty, self-deprecatory and all that. But is it true?

Well, after surveying some of the more or less current offerings in the stf magazine field, we have selected some rather remarkable examples which may or may not prove the cashew, pistachio, filbert or what-have-you components among the editors of this frenetic and ever-fascinating type of publication.

For instance, let us look at the amusing INCINERATIONS (from effigy) published quarterly by the Grape Press, 9109 SW Oleson Road, Portland 19, Oregon. At the foot of page eight, in a section entitled THE EDITORS NOTE, we find this—

. . . the sinister effects of left-handed thinking. Many ways have been devised to handle the subject of occultry as it comes up, but our right-hand man, who has two right hands, is capable of dexterously beating it down. His grasp of the subject is firm and his hold will not relax until the subject collapses. . . .

[*Turn page*]

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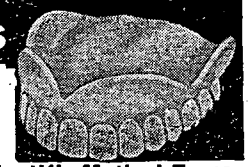

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Which suggests, none too slyly, a certain amount of internecine or intramural sport amongst this particular group of squirrel-baiters. And as the issue in question contains little occultry it seems probable that the anonymous "right-hand man" succeeded eminently in his collapsing.

The Avant Garde

Here's another suggestion of editorial tree-fruitiness. It occurs in what will be the most pretentiously printed fanzine of all time, the sixth issue of ORB, "an amateur magazine devoted to the avant garde in fantasy," published quarterly by Bob Johnson from P.O. Box No. 941, Greeley, Colorado.

Behind its double-sheet pink-black-and-gold dragon cover Editor Johnson has assembled the widest variety of type-sizes, ink-colors and reproductive methods it has been our experience to encounter in a single issue, up to and including FLAIR, which seems to have exerted its influence, even to a Dutch-door half-page inset illustration opposite page one.

However, most pretentious of all is a pink-paper four-page insert right at the magazine's navel, printed in hand-designed baked letters on pages adorned with gold and/or silver decorations of roses, bunches of grapes and the like. It is devoted to a poem entitled THE LAUGHING SATYR by Henry Andrew Ackerman.

And what sort of verse do we find on these lush, plush pages? Well, on the first of them we find our horned hero as he " . . . rises and stretches, from his human head to his furry toes . . . " And then, on page two, " . . . quietly the satyr listens, one cloven hoof pointed . . . "

Will someone please inform us as to how one (count him, 1) satyr can have at one and the same time "furry toes" and "one cloven hoof." And furthermore we want to know why Editor-Publisher Johnson did not notice this somewhat elemental discrepancy before going to all the trouble of baked letters on panty-pink paper? Not to mention them grapes, roses, etc. Avant garde—indeed!

Or maybe it was about a three-legged satyr with two sets of furry toes and one cloven hoof. We remain—baffled.

So What?

And now we return to the so-what de-

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partment, with Editor-in-Chief and Publisher Lawrence R. Campbell of FANTASM, published at 43 Tremont Street, Malden 48, Massachusetts, taking over on a page "Reserved for the Editor."

Says Editor-in-Chief and Publisher Campbell in part—

. . . Now to clear up a few things. Number one is about how often we are published. We say we come out bi-monthly yet we've been out for the last three months in a row. The reason is the fact we have so much time since it is the summer but when fall arrives we will not have so much time. . . .

Now about the next issue. As of now I know about nothing of what will be in it. . . . We also plan to send a copy to one or more promag (undecided yet) for review. We suspect a new Z rating will be initiated but we hope for better results.

All in all this comes pretty close to being the laugh of the month. Campbell, could develop this style into a whole new brand of humorous expression. He says less in more words than anyone since Cotton Mather.

More consciously zany is the title page of a fanzine which calls itself IMPOSSIBLE ADVENTURES, which has popped out of Seattle, Washington, under the editorial aegis of Burnett R. Toskey, residence 3935 15th NE, Seattle 5. In his own column, fittingly (or is it wishful thinking?) entitled THE EDITOR CROAKS, Mr. Toskey says, again in part—

. . . This is far from a purposeless magazine. It has a very ambitious purpose, that of driving all other magazines out of business. Though it isn't too probable that this first issue will do so, we have high hopes for the future. . . .

Verily, we are warned—and quaking. For IMPOSSIBLE ADVENTURES is truly—impossible. Which we call fulfilling a designated purpose to the proverbial T. After all this, we leave the verdict on the nuttiness if not the fruitiness of fan editors up to you. However, it's all in amiable malice—it says here.

—THE EDITOR.

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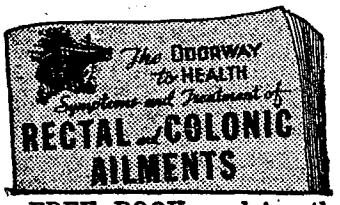

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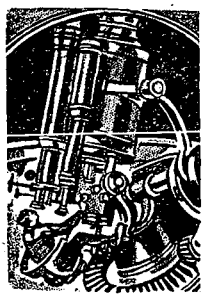
SCIENCE FICTION FORECAST
For The Next Issue

EARLY spring is—or at any rate should be—a time of light hearts and high spirits. With this in mind we have scheduled as our lead novel just about the most light-hearted and high-spirited story we have ever encountered in science fiction—THE CONTINENT MAKERS by L. Sprague de Camp.

Mr. de Camp's novel is no story of dictatorships, of mutants or of invasion of



Earth—although it does contain a certain amount of underlying menace, thanks to one of the most ingenious intergalactic real estate swindles that ever entered a non-human ingenuity.

It is a story of hilarious satire in the "Churchillian" movement, of romance frustrated not only by kidnapping and other violence but by the laws of genetics and alien custom. It is a story of mad gadgets, of cosmic and comic errors, of dizzy dangers that crop up in the most unexpected places—from the gentlemen's lounge of the Grand Central Station to the unlikely bird-and-turtle sanctuaries of barren Ascension Island in the South Atlantic.

This is Sprague de Camp at his hilarious best—original, ingenious, swift and funny as a Vishnian crutch. Yet it is soundly based and developed through situations and events that could only occur in a science fiction story. We asked the author to write us a story in the mood of the best of his prewar efforts—and got THE CONTINENT MAKERS, which to us is the finest achievement of his career to date.

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With this brilliant short novel will appear a pair of novelets in very different mood. In THE VOID BEYOND Robert Moore Williams has approached the actuality of space travel from a grimly and effectively realistic point of view.

Spacemen are a species apart as they travel to and fro in the Solar System—and they are all men. The job is considered too gruelling, too tough, to permit women to travel the planets. For space-sickness is, like ulcers, with them all the time, tying them in knots, taking years from their lives.

It fell to the lot of Captain Eric Gaunt of the *S.S. Martian Bounce* to have to take off into space with the first woman aboard. To make it worse his assignment was the most protracted, difficult and dangerous of his whole career. Furthermore, Dr. Frances Marion had that most annoying of all qualities in a woman—a faculty for being invariably in the right.

Naturally conflict develops in the flight to the very lip of deep space to discover the peril potential in a huge drifting cloud of cosmic dust. And over all we encounter the day-to-day problems of life in a space-ship under the most rigorous conditions. It is our belief that this voyage of the *Martian Bounce* into THE VOID BEYOND will be long remembered.

Lost Planet

By way of balance our second novelet, MILORDS METHUSELAH by Carter Sprague, deals with the speculative side of stf. In this instance speculation is directed toward a "lost" planet, early settled by Earthfolk, where cosmic conditions have so speeded up living metabolism that, to its inhabitants, one Earth month is a year of life, seven Earth years a hoary old age.

The rediscoverers, trapped by an accident in landing their space-ship, are Pilot Michael Hayes, and scientists Liza Farren and Smith Jacobs. Isolated for ten years on a speeded-up world they find themselves considered immortals and given near-demigod status. For their decade is equivalent to 120 years—four generations on the planet Planus.

Immortality has some strange effects upon Hayes and Liza, driving him to live like a Roman emperor and her ultimately to betrayal of their true status. Only Jacobs, who is older, keeps his head level under the

[*Turn page*]

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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Thrilling Wonder Stories, published bimonthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, Harvey Burns, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing editor, None. Business manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. H. L. Herbert. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1950. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1952.)

pressure of adulation the trio receives with the passing of time.

Naturally there has to be a crackup—and when it comes disaster can be averted only by immense sacrifice, a sacrifice which comes from an utterly unexpected quarter. MILORDS METHUSELAH is a novelet reared upon a fascinating idea and carried to a climax of immense emotional impact.

There will be plenty of short stories, selected from as varied and intriguing an inventory as this magazine has ever known. And accompanying them will be a full crew of departments and other features. April in TWS looks to be a month of eminent distinction as well as interest.

—THE EDITOR.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW

POST-HISTORIC MAN by Roderick Seidenberg, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill ($3.75).

This is a curiously important volume. Endorsed by authorities as varied as Lewis Mumford, Reinhold Neibuhr, Nobel Prize-winner H. J. Muller, Waldo Frank and many other eminent folk, Mr. Seidenberg has attempted, through an utterly rational scientific theoretical approach, to determine whether the human race, faced by the novel dangers, assists and tensions of the machine age, must go the way of Dr. Toynbee's previous civilizations or face a fate entirely new.

He sees history slowing down with ultimate worldwide mechanical progress until, ultimately, humanity becomes fixed in a sort of stasis. He cites our powerful urge toward stability as the basic cause of this coming change and ultimate sacrifice of the erraticities of individualism.

In short, Mr. Seidenberg presents another face of the same coin so brilliantly and frighteningly revealed by the late George Orwell in his already-classic *1984*. To us, of course, such a prediction replaces the threat of insecurity.

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with the far more dreadful peril of dullness. But Mr. Seidenberg's book, for all the unrelieved seriousness of his approach, is not dull.

POCKET ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ATOMIC ENERGY by Frank Gaynor, Philosophical Library, New York ($7.50).

From A (symbol for the element *argon*) to Zr (symbol for the element *zirconium*) Mr. Gaynor's invaluable handbook, complete with charts, graphs, tables, diagrams and drawings, to say nothing of thumbnail biographies of atomic notables from Bethe to Yukawa, is the most complete dictionary of atomics we have seen.

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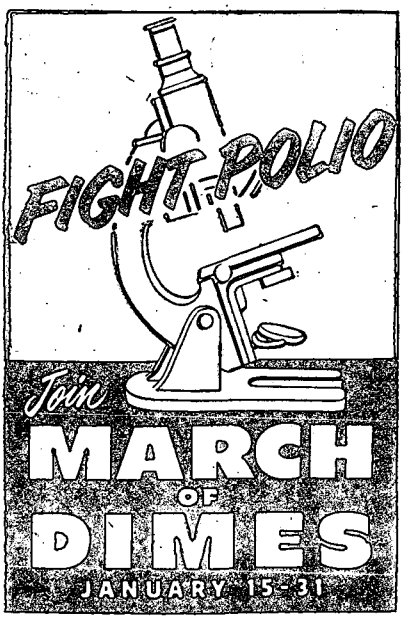
Fergusonite, a "rather rare uranium mineral," is just above Enrico Fermi, originator of the neutrino theory, which is thoroughly defined under its own listing. And Einstein is just below *efficiency* (in its precise nuclear meaning, of course).

This is one book we intend to keep handy, not as a fact-checker but as an invaluable personal reference volume. It is costly, yes—but worth the price many times over if your interests are nuclearly inclined.



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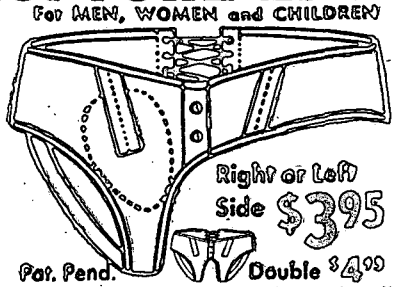

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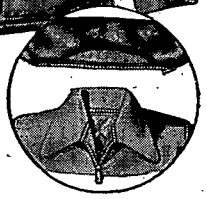

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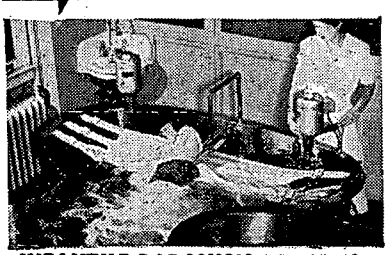

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